Asari Endou
Illustration by
Marui-no
5
limited
Magical Girl
Raising Project

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limited
(1)
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Marui-no

CHARACTERS

PYTHIE FREDERICA

Can reflect whoever she wants in her crystal ball.

TOT POP

Can materialize music notes with her magic guitar.

PUKIN

Can change the thoughts of anyone she stabs with her magic sword.

SONIA BEAN

Can make whatever she touches crumble to bits.

CHARACTERS
CAPTAIN GRACE
Can summon a really cool magic pirate ship.
WEDDIN
If you make a promise she can make sure you keep it.
FUNNY TRICK
Can swap a hidden thing with another hidden thing.
RAIN POW
Can instantly fill a rainbow bridge.
POSTARIE
Can send any item back to its owner.
TEPSEKEMEI
Can become one with the wind to go anywhere.
KURU-KURU HIME
Can control many balloons.
MANA
Uses spells and ceremonies to perform various magics.
HANA GEKOKUJOU
Can make senses incredibly sharp.
7753
Uses magic goggles that tell her all about her targets.
ARCHFIEND PAM
Uses her four large black wings to fight.
RIPPLE
Can throw shuriken that always hit their target.

Magical Girl Raising Project limited 5

Asari Endou
Illustration by Marui-no

YEN ON
New York

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Magical Girl Raising Project, Vol. 5
Asari Endou

Translation by Jennifer Ward
Cover art by Marui-no

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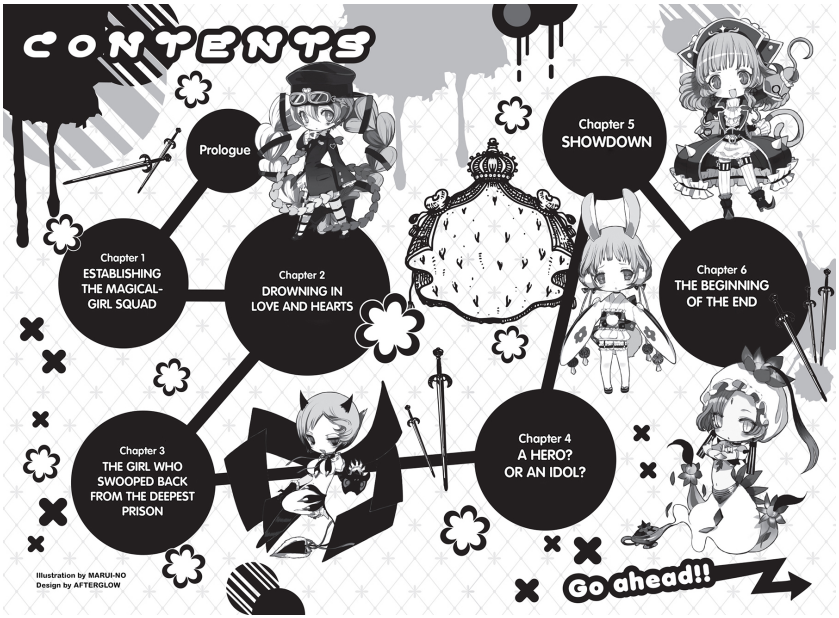
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Yen Newsletter

PROLOGUE

Even a heart toughened and rid of shame by a year of life as a teacher would still feel sad if wounded. That was true of anyone. Nozomi was no exception.

It had happened that day at lunchtime. Some students had been enjoying themselves, hanging out and chatting on the stair landing. The door to the roof was locked, so the kids couldn't go there whenever they wanted, but nothing prevented them from going to the landing below the roof. It was rather larger than the others, but few students would gather at this location. Nobody would pass through aside from those who had business there, and they liked that particular quality about it.

When Nozomi walked down the nearby hallway, heading to her next class, she heard boisterous laughter coming from that landing, even though lunch break was almost over.

It seemed like a good idea to call out to them. Nozomi steeled herself and set her foot on the first step of the stairs to the roof.

"Oh, right, we're about outta time, huh?"

"For real? Oh, you're right. Lunchtime's almost over."

It seemed there was no need for her to even say anything. She stepped down from the stair, and then, right when she was about to be on her way again—

"What class was next, again?"

"It's the Monster, isn't it? I think."

"Oh, Japanese?"

"We don't have to hand in the homework yet, right?"

"If you mean the book report, we just have to do that by the weekend."

"What a pain in the ass."

Namiyama Middle School was a private school. Every single one of the students had made it through strict entrance examinations. No matter how much of a "pain in the ass" they

found it to be, it was unusual to find any brave souls who would skip class.

Nozomi let the two students rush by down the stairs, cackling as they went. Looking at their backs as they headed toward their classroom, she noticed their hairstyles looked familiar, and their voices sounded familiar, too.

Both students were from class 2-B. As Nozomi surreptitiously watched them go, she saw them arrive at the classroom she herself was about to enter. So she wasn't mistaken, after all. She turned the fact over in her mind, digesting the implications, and as she listened to the bell that signaled the end of break, Nozomi's heart was broken.

Teachers got nicknames. This was not at all unusual. That had happened back when Nozomi had been a student, too. On the kinder side, there was Mrs. Kobayashi, called Mrs. K, and Mr. Watanabe, referred to simply as Nabe. Plenty of teachers had been awarded horrible nicknames from boys and girls who were as cruel as you'd expect them to be at that age. But teachers like that would get their cruel epithets for a reason. These "bad teachers" were unpleasant, the sort who constantly reprimanded students for unfair reasons, or creeps who ogled the girls. Some were actually quite excellent, just very strict even knowing they were hated. But that didn't change the animosity their students had for them.

That pair's conversation clung tenaciously to her thoughts.

"What class was next, again?"

"It's the Monster, isn't it? I think."

"Oh, Japanese?"

Even if it was your least favorite subject, you wouldn't call a Japanese class a "monster." Those two were clearly referring to Nozomi, the Japanese teacher, personally. From the way the other kid hadn't questioned the nickname, she could also deduce that the nickname Monster was entrenched.

Monster.

From her time as a student to her year as a teacher, she'd never had such a cruel nickname. The simple sharpness of it cut deep, a keen edge that could slice the heart of its target to shreds.

Nozomi wasn't the type to scold students harshly. She tried to be gentle in her reprimanding. And she could swear she was very careful about the way she taught her class, too. She didn't get her kicks trapping students with malicious trick questions. Some might

call her useless as a teacher because she was too compromising with students, but she was fine with that. She knew just how much harder her job would get if her students hated her.

And yet she was hated, perhaps detested, even. The nickname Monster was that damaging. It meant they didn't even regard her as a fellow human being. They were treating her as some completely alien creature. This was beyond the fence that stood between student and teacher—it was the thick wall that divided humans from *other things*. It was doubtful anyone could break through that.

Though her heart ached after this intense shock, Nozomi did her job. A teacher couldn't abandon her post just because her students hurt her feelings—not even a full-time adjunct who had yet to be officially appointed.

Besides, Nozomi's ordeals weren't over yet. Further unpleasantness was still ahead. She had another job after school: overseeing a meeting of the Cultural Festival Clean-Up Committee. All she had to do was be there and give advice if needed, but this time around, one of the committee members was the biggest troublemaker in the school. Nozomi was just praying the girl wouldn't cause her any problems.

She heaved a deep, deep sigh. Their grade's head teacher, who sat three seats away from her, expressed some concern. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm fine," Nozomi responded with a smile that was surely not very convincing. She doubted she looked "fine." The other teacher glanced back at Nozomi with worry.

After school, Nozomi dragged herself to the science room. Sliding open the door, she found it completely empty. Inside were the long white table and three chairs that were kept in there. Since the school didn't have a science club, there were no students around.

For some reason or another, her steps grew more cautious. As she was a Japanese teacher, the science room was out of her territory. And on top of that, she'd never even entered the science prep room up ahead. Wasn't it normally locked anyway? Dangerous chemicals and experimental apparatuses were stored in there, so students couldn't enter without permission. The same was somewhat true for Nozomi, even though she was a teacher; she was basically an intruder here.

Why were they meeting in the science prep room? The student council should have made the decision, but it hadn't taken much responsibility in handling the matter. The president had laughed, saying, "It just kinda ended up that way, you know?" *So then who made the decision, if not you?*

The door to the prep room was at the back of the science room. The small entrance was hidden in the shadow of the cleaning-supplies locker. Unlike the other classrooms, this door wasn't a sliding one, and you had to turn a knob for entry. Since the prep room had been added to the building only twenty years ago, it looked more modern than the other, older rooms…or so she'd heard from the principal.

Nozomi put her hand on the knob and twisted. It moved. It wasn't locked.

There were already people inside. One, two, three, four, five in total. They were all staring at Nozomi.

The one poking the anatomical model was Umi Shibahara from class 2-C. She was incredibly athletically talented and had set prefectural records for the hundred-meter dash and the triple jump or something. Perhaps she just had too much energy, as her antics featured heavily in the rumors around here. She was one of the most famous people in the school.

Umi Shibahara turned around suddenly, and her ponytail whapped someone on the nose…Kayo Nemura, also in class 2-C. She was often seen hanging out with Shibahara.

Peeking into the tortoise aquarium was Mine Musubiya, the representative for class 2-D. An excellent student, favored by teachers and popular with the other kids, too. She was neither a jerk nor an unwilling appointee—she was the proper sort of class rep.

The two sitting in chairs in the corner were both first-years. The one in the glasses was Tatsuko Sakaki; the one with long hair was Kaori Ninotsugi. Their timidity wasn't unexpected, given they were among older students, but even then, they seemed particularly shy, from the way they tied their hair to the strictly dress code–adherent length of their skirts. Nozomi didn't teach first-years, so all she knew of them was their names.

Eyes jerking to her wristwatch, Nozomi checked the time. It was five minutes until the meeting was to begin, so she wasn't late.

The Cultural Festival Clean-Up Committee was in charge of

deciding who would do what when it came to tidying up. Compared to the presentations and staff refreshment booths, the stars of the show, this job had a reputation for being boring and unpopular.

What's more, the role would sometimes draw uncalled-for resentment from other students. Even if you assigned tasks as equally as possible, some kids would always complain, *"How come we're the only ones slaving away, here?"*

That was the other reason that nobody ever chose to be on the cleaning committee. Ask for volunteers all you wanted, but nobody would raise their hands. Still, you couldn't run a festival without one, so Nozomi was told that the student council would randomly select students to be the sacrificial lambs.

She was shocked, then, that all of these kids had gathered five minutes early. Maybe even sacrificial lambs could be motivated, in their own way.

CHAPTER 1

ESTABLISHING THE MAGICAL-GIRL SQUAD

☆ **Postarie**

Tatsuko Sakaki had been timid and introverted ever since she was young.

When she was chosen to be on the Cultural Festival Clean-Up Committee, where she'd be forced to work together with kids she'd never spoken to before, she wondered how she would manage. But her friend and classmate Kaori was chosen, too, which was a huge relief. Tatsuko was glad just to have someone who would join her in whining *"Awww, man!"* and *"This sucks."* When she thought about having to make her way to the science prep room alone and trembling, the presence of a companion put her heart at ease.

Heading to the meeting, they passed by the table tennis club alternates doing push-ups in the hallway and ignored the sound of the concert band practicing. Putting her hand on the doorknob of the science prep room, Tatsuko found it wasn't locked. This was the cleaning committee's first meeting, and Tatsuko had left early to ensure she wouldn't make the older students wait. It would have been best if she could have come before the teacher even unlocked the room, but it seemed there were already people here.

The room was dyed in the crimson light of the sunset, and inside was a girl sitting on a chair. "You're both on the cleaning committee, too?" she asked.

"You too, huh?" Kaori responded.

Tatsuko left the conversation to her, practically hiding behind Kaori as she listened to them talk.

A few minutes later, the prep room door opened noisily. Two

more older students joined the group. One of them was famous enough that even Tatsuko knew who she was.

Umi Shibahara. Her hair, tied into a ponytail, was dyed a shade lighter than what was allowed by the school, and there was something sloppy about the way she wore her uniform. She was well-known thanks to the dubious tales of her exploits: They said they couldn't measure her grip strength because she'd crushed the hand dynamometer in her fist and that she'd once marched into some yakuza office to beat them all down solo. The veracity of these stories aside, she was not the type you wanted to get involved with.

Tatsuko had assumed all the students had been picked for this against their will, but it seemed this was not the case for Umi.

"It was just kinda like, y'know, I mean, sorta like, I could smell an adventure!" She was extremely excited. But what did she mean, she could "smell an adventure"? The normal assumption would be that this was a joke. But if Umi was in fact serious and Tatsuko laughed, she could see it ending very badly. So she just let the remark slide by with an ambiguous expression that could be taken either way.

Tatsuko preferred talking to older students over her own peers. If she acted timid talking with a classmate, they would look down on her for it. But if she were talking with an upperclassman, sometimes they'd interpret that as deference. The problem here was that one of these older girls was famous in school for her wild character, and Tatsuko didn't know what sort of attitude might light her fuse. Maintaining this vague, noncommittal demeanor was really hard on her nerves.

The crimson hue of the sunset faded, and already a dark reddish-brown was beginning to illuminate the older girls' faces. It was winter now. The sun would set soon. Checking Umi's expression, Tatsuko saw she was glancing around the area restlessly, as if she was expecting something.

She wasn't about to go on a rampage, was she? If she was the sort of person the rumors said, then it was bound to happen. Tatsuko continued to wait with an upset stomach from the building anxiety, and that was when the door to the prep room opened.

It was the teacher. Tatsuko knew her, too: Ms. Nozomi Himeno. She didn't teach first-year classes, but she was still hard to ignore. She was the same size as the students…particularly the first-years.

Despite probably being in her late twenties, she looked unusually young—childlike, in fact. If she were to wear a uniform, she'd probably have no trouble blending in with the students. Her age-defying appearance had earned her the nickname Monster, something even an outsider like Tatsuko knew.

"Have you already started?" the teacher asked.

"No, not yet."

"Then let's begin. It's a little early, but that just means we'll finish quick." Ms. Himeno sat down in a chair, prompting one of the older girls to stand up.

It was the girl who had entered the room first. A single thick braid fell down her back, and her red plastic-framed glasses reflected the setting sun. She looked like a class rep. "I'm Musubiya from class 2-D, and I'll preside over this meeting for now. Thank you very much for gathering here today for this Cultural Festival Clean-Up Committee meeting. Now then, before we decide how roles will be allocated, let's introduce—"

"So you're all finally here," came a voice from no place in particular, interrupting the meeting. It sounded high-pitched and youthful, like a child's—one you'd generally never hear in a middle school. Tatsuko and the older girls glanced around the room, but there were no little kids anywhere.

"You all have the strongest magical potential of anyone in this school. I want you to use your talents to save me… Of course, I'll thank you for it. By making you all into magical girls!" A small, round ball of light fell from the roof. For an instant, Tatsuko tensed, thinking the light bulb was falling. The luminous orb slowly floated down and away from the ceiling, dimming as it descended. When it settled on the table, it had become a dull, pale white light. Within was a doll about half a foot tall. "Nice to meet you. My name is Toko. As you can see, I'm a fairy."

Everyone held their tongues, eyes locked on the creature. It wasn't a doll. It was moving. Words were coming from its mouth. Its musculature and movements were not artificial. Its expression was full of life, too. But it was still clearly not human. It was wreathed in light, with translucent, insect-like wings growing from its back—and there was no way any human could be just half a foot tall.

"As you can all see, you all have the capacity. I can nurture that talent and make you into full-fledged magical girls. Please, accept

this offer and save me. I'm being chased by evil mages!"

Suddenly aware she had been holding her breath the entire time, Tatsuko blew out a *phew*. She was trying to make sense of what was happening and what she was hearing, but to no avail. She could tell she was confused. Looking to the side to see what Kaori thought of all this, she squeaked.

She found a strange woman sitting there. She was wearing a frighteningly garish and strange outfit. It was the kind of blindingly gaudy garment seen only in high fashion, the circus, cosplay events, anime, manga, or video games. The two ponytails hanging from either side of her head were a beautiful ombré. Her gloves sparkled in seven different colors, and her flamboyant clothing exposed quite a lot of skin, too. She was crowned with a prismatic halo that floated above her head, and another, larger halo hovered across her back. There were more around her ankles, too. As accessories, they completely defied reality. Whether she was hanging them with thread or supporting them with wire, they were somehow all in midair.

Tatsuko yelped, and the fancy-looking lady's shoulders twitched as she looked at Tatsuko. Her face was beautiful, and so surreal it carried just as much impact as her clothing. Quickly, confusion spread across her perfect face. "…Tsuko?"

Tatsuko panicked and released the girl's sleeve, startled by the fact that she'd been holding on to it in the first place. Her fingers *should* have been squeezing Kaori's sleeve as she hid behind her. For whatever reason, at some point, she had ended up clutching the sleeve of this unfamiliar girl through methods unknown.

"Are you Tsuko?" The girl seemed confused. And Tatsuko was confused by her question, too. How would this stranger even know Tatsuko's nickname? And where had Kaori gone? She gazed at her surroundings.

A pirate and a stage magician were pointing at each other and shouting. Both of them were no less beautiful than the girl who sat beside Tatsuko. A ballerina bedecked in ribbons was trembling, her face white as a sheet. And for some reason, there was also a bride in a wedding dress, and an Arabian-style dancing girl was floating in the air (!) and watching them from near the ceiling.

Suddenly, Tatsuko looked at her own hands and arms. Her fingers were long. These weren't her hands. The outfit she was wearing was not her school uniform, either. She looked at her

reflection in the window glass, and staring back at her was a cute version of a postal delivery person she'd once seen in some classic film. Just like the others, her features were perfectly flawless. When she gently patted her face, the delivery girl in the window touched her own face, too.

"Do you get it now? You're magical girls, with all the talents that come with the title. You're the only ones who can drive away the evil mages who are approaching this town."

Tatsuko listened intently to everything the fairy said. But none of it stuck.

☆ Captain Grace

There were a lot of people who judged Umi Shibahara to be a lawless troublemaker.

However, the phrase did not describe her accurately. She could be violent, and she would often ignore the rules, but those were just the consequences of her nature. At her core, Umi Shibahara was an adventurer, and all she did was follow the desires oozing out of her.

She wanted excitement! She wanted thrills! She wanted to see what she'd never seen before! She wanted to do what she'd never done before! There had to be amazing things out there in the world that Umi didn't know about yet!

She wished she could be a character in a story. She didn't care if the goal was to find treasure or to beat up bad guys. As long as there was great adventure to be had, that was enough for her.

Whether by good luck or bad, Umi's hometown was surrounded by nothing but mountains. When she was very small, she would literally go run around the mountains and fields—until she'd gotten herself lost one time in kindergarten and was no longer allowed outside. It was around that time when she'd learned various escape techniques, like pulling up tatami to remove the floorboards, pushing up ceiling boards, or hopping out the second-floor window to the branch of a tree that grew in the garden. Thereafter, she had cultivated a series of virtues: the strength of spirit to never be discouraged, even when scolded by her parents; the creative ingenuity needed to make escapes; the survival skills she'd learned in the wilderness; the physical ability to contend with beasts; and so on and so forth. It all led up to this point.

Yes, to this very moment. In middle school, together with Kayo Nemura, her childhood friend and constant companion, Umi had continuously sought adventure.

While everyone else had descended into chaos, Umi was different. She'd always dreamed of adventure, and her strength, experience, and most of all, her passion had been building all this time, so this was the very situation she'd always been waiting for.

When you're ready for anything, you approach things with a different mind-set than those who lack any preparation for such a strange situation. What's more, she'd had a premonition. She'd felt almost certain that something was sure to happen before the end of the cleaning committee meeting that day.

"What's going on?!"

"What the heck is this?"

"A f-fairy?"

"Is this a prank? Where's the hidden camera?"

With a sidelong glance toward the others and their panicked commotion, Umi worked to get a handle on the situation. She tried lightly waving a hand. She clenched a fist. She drew in a breath, then exhaled again. She did a little jump. She'd changed, right down to the very structure of her body. She was strong and full of energy. She even felt as if she could knock out a whale in one punch.

Despite her excitement, her mind was calm—silently ablaze.

She checked her reflection in the window glass. A sword was hanging from her waist. She pushed the hilt up with her thumb to draw about two knuckles' worth of blade out from the sheath. The single-edged curved sword shone dully. It was the weapon of a pirate. Just lightly touching her thumb to it drew blood. It was sharp. It was real.

The fairy had said they'd become magical girls. Umi seemed to be dressed up as a girly version of Captain Hook from *Peter Pan*, but the term "magical girl" made more sense for the other faces present.

"All right!" Umi pumped a fist. Everyone else seemed to be panicked and confused as they stared at her, but she wasn't bothered. "You said magical girls, right?"

"Yep. You guys all have magical talent. You're the ones who'll be able to beat the evil mages."

"Hmm…"

The fairy told them that her enemies had chased her out of the Magical Kingdom all the way here. The evil mages would mess up the human world if the girls did nothing, so they had to drive these people away somehow. The fairy spoke to them at length about this, but Umi casually ignored it.

"So we just have to fight these evil mages and win, right?" Umi just meant to confirm what it was they were supposed to do, but it seemed the fairy interpreted her inquiry as questioning the point of

engaging at all.

"If you fight them for me, then you'll be able to transform into magical girls anytime you like. That's my thanks." The fairy listed the merits of cooperating, then began to explain what her prize to them all would entail. "Magical girls are way stronger and faster than normal humans, and each one has their own magical power."

There was a blink in space and a scatter of some unknown substance. Umi felt weight in her hands, and when she looked down, she was holding a heart-shaped device. Something was displayed on its screen.

"That's a magical phone that only magical girls can use. Your names and personal information are all written in there."

"You're pretty prepared for this."

Already, something that looked like Umi's personal data was displayed on the device the fairy had given her. On-screen, there was a cute, cartoonish pirate captain and, beside it, some text.

"Captain Grace." That must be her name. "Uses a magic ship that can go really fast over water." Probably her magic.

"Hey, Kayo," said Umi. "What kinda magic do you have?" From the side, she peeked at the magical phone belonging to the stage magician–themed magical girl. Her name was "Funny Trick," and her ability was "to switch any two hidden items."

"Um… Are you Umi?" Kayo asked.

"You can't tell?"

"No, I can't! I have no idea what's going on here! Do you, Umi?!"

"I get the gist of it."

"The *gist* isn't good enough! How can you just accept all this?!"

"I told you, didn't I? I've had a feeling about this since morning. By the way, your fishnets are pretty sexy."

"That's got nothing to do with this right now!" The fairy cut off Umi and Kayo's conversation, flying in the air to land on the desk on her knees. "Please! Save me! And not just me! Save the world!" She was yelling. Perhaps she'd had about all she could take, because she was starting to act hysterical.

"Sure, I'll do it." Of course Umi would. The adventure she'd been waiting for had arrived.

The fairy's face was bursting with glee. "Really? Thank you!"

"Umi!"

"Shut up, Kayo."

“Don’t tell me to shut up!”

Umi couldn’t deal with Kayo anymore. She smiled at the fairy. “Anyway, me and Kayo will help you out.”

“Why am I in on this, too?!”

Another girl interrupted Kayo’s wailing. “H-hold on a moment, Shibahara… That *is* who you are, right?”

“Yeah, it’s Shibahara. Wait, are you Monst—Ms. Himeno?”

The ribbon-strewn ballerina waved her hands violently in a show of indignation. She still looked about as young now as she had pretransformation.

Kayo bowed her head, saying, “Go on, Ms. Himeno. Please talk some sense into her.”

“That’s no way to speak to your teacher! I don’t really understand all of this, but a fight with evil mages is serious business! Let’s leave all that to the police. It’s not something middle school students should be doing, at least.”

“Even the teacher’s accepted this for some reason…,” Kayo muttered, clutching her head. What was she so unhappy about?

The fairy raised her head and countered the ribbon girl’s remarks. “We have no more time. Our enemies are already close. And the police won’t be able to beat them. Only magical girls can!”

“I can’t let students engage in such a dangerous task!”

“And I’m telling you if you don’t stop them now, the peril will be even greater!”

“C’mon, let’s do it! It’ll totally be fun.”

“Shibahara!”

“Personally, I feel like anyone who wouldn’t try to save such a cute li’l fairy has got some problems, as a human being. She’s asking for our help, so we might as well. That’s what girl power’s all about, right?” Umi tugged on the sleeve of the girl in the wedding dress and stared into the eyes of the girl in the rainbow costume. “If we don’t do this now, we’ll be totally missing out. And even if all you guys aren’t gonna do it, me and Kayo will manage ourselves. But you might as well join us, right? C’mon, let’s do this, let’s *do* this! I just know we’ll have a good time.”

“I wouldn’t mind joining in.” The wedding dress girl stood up. She even had a carefully lit candle and a bouquet. “I thought this might be a prank, but this fairy is clearly alive, isn’t she? Apparently, what she said about incredible powers is no lie.” She plucked a ten-yen coin—probably used in some experiment—from

where it had been left in the metal dish at the front of the shelf. Using only her index and middle fingers, she squeezed it to show everyone that she could bend it. “I was starting to get bored of studying for entrance exams. Powers like these would open some new avenues to us, wouldn’t they? I’ve determined that this is worth the risk.”

“Me too!” The girl carrying the rainbow on her back raised her right hand. “I’ll do it, too! I’ve always wanted something like this! You’ll do it, too, right, Tsuko?”

The postal delivery–style girl next to her glanced around nervously and then hesitantly nodded.

“Mei’ll do it, too.” Hearing a voice from above, Umi looked up at the ceiling. There was a girl floating cross-legged in midair, dressed in a very revealing outfit like the dancing girls from *Arabian Nights*. “Mei wants to be a magical girl.”

“Nice!” said the fairy. “I like those answers! So let’s get pumped up and beat those evil mages!”

“Like I said! How can you guys just accept this situation?!” Kayo yelled.

“Why are you all responding so quickly?! Take another moment to consider just how dangerous this is!” The girl in the ribbons whacked the table, and her curls bounced like coiled springs.

The fairy was flung off the table and caught by the rainbow girl. Unfortunately, one of the table legs had broken around the middle, causing it to tilt to one side.

“If you absolutely insist on backing out…” Still in the rainbow girl’s hands, the fairy turned back to face the ribbon girl. “Then I’ll just erase your memories and make you forget about this transformation. I can’t have any of you telling people about this. I’ve got to keep everything about magic a secret.”

“You can’t just…”

“You’re a teacher at this school, aren’t you? I understand a teacher’s desire to protect her students. I don’t know much about the human world, but that’s what teachers do, right?” The fairy’s expression appeared somehow more mature. Perhaps it was the illumination of the sunset. “Then you fight together with them. Either your memories will be erased and you’ll go back to your normal lifestyle on your own, or you’ll fight the evil mages together with your students. They’re almost here. It’s not just me in trouble —it’s the whole world. Please. Save me.”

☆ Tepsekemei

Mei had an incredibly limited amount of memories and experiences. Even if she learned something new, it would be quickly overwritten, leaving behind nothing worthwhile. And even the memories that did remain to her weren't all that clear, either. She would immediately forget anything that wasn't useful to her day-to-day life—because she didn't need it.

When she was zoning out, that was literally all she was doing. Someone else might look at her and believe she was deep in thought, but Mei didn't think or consider things, since she knew it was simply a waste to do so.

Having taken this lack of mental activity for granted, becoming a magical girl was an excess of freedom for Mei. Everything about the world was dazzling and bright. She could interpret other people's intentions and use the same methods to communicate her own will. Her limbs moved freely and lightly. She could jump, leap, spin her arms around, fold her legs, do anything.

Best of all, she could fly. If she thought, *I want to go here, I want to go there*, then she was free to do so. No one could stop her.

While the others were having some conversation she couldn't really follow, Mei continued to investigate her new abilities. She could move quickly, she was strong, and she could fly. She put her hand to her stomach. There was no chronic hunger, no sense of starvation that never went away no matter how much she was fed. She didn't feel like she had to expel any waste. All sexual desire had disappeared, too.

I see, she thought. As she'd gained many things, she'd lost many, too. That must mean she'd not received this body for free, but rather had acquired it in exchange for something else now gone. After this consideration, she found herself shocked that she was capable of forming such thoughts. She could add and subtract.

Plenty about this was fun, in general. Even in this one room, there were lots of interesting-looking objects. As she fiddled with this, touched that, biting, whacking, rolling, and generally messing around, the conversation continued.

Mei said she wanted to stay a magical girl and found out that the others did, too. It seemed that magical girls were special. Though she didn't quite know what to do with the ensuing pride, she decided she would stick with these people. According to the

tiny human with wings, they had to beat these “evil mage” people or else they couldn’t keep their powers. Mei thought that would be very boring. Before she had become a magical girl, her world had always been peaceful and her life easy, but now that she knew about this new world, she didn’t want to go back.

Going outside, she learned even more. Magical girls had abilities called magic. Mei could become one with the air. By melting into the atmosphere, she could fly through it. And it seemed she could do much more with it, too.

She zoned out, listening to the human with wings giving them all instructions, and then noticed that the rainbow human was watching Mei. The rainbow human spoke to her. “Are you bored?”

“Why?”

“Oh, you just looked like you were.”

Mei wasn’t, of course. She’d never experienced anything so fun and interesting in her whole life. But the rainbow human had said she looked bored.

All the other magical girls were changing the shapes of their faces while they spoke out loud to communicate. They did not look at anuses or bump heads. Mei wasn’t trying to change the shape of her face. Maybe that had suggested she was bored.

Having hypothesized this much, Mei tried changing her own face shape at the rainbow human. She figured that alone wouldn’t be enough, so she also tried making a sound: “Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

That should give the sense she was properly enjoying herself. But the rainbow human bobbed her head back and forth and said, “I’m sorry,” then backed away. That didn’t seem like an acknowledgment that Mei was having fun. The other magical girls were also staring at Mei. She realized she’d failed to get the reaction she wanted.

If I have another chance, I’ll do a little better next time, Mei thought.

Being a magical girl was really hard but, at the same time, interesting.

☆ Captain Grace

Teachers, like parents, were an annoying obstacle. They always

tried to get in the way of her exploits.

This totally unreal, fantastical event was happening right in front of them! Umi was completely baffled that Ms. Himeno could say something so completely lacking in adventurous spirit. A flying fairy coming to bestow you with magical power wasn't something people got to experience more than once in a lifetime. In fact, for most, it wouldn't happen at all. Even if she was their teacher, ordering them to kick this stroke of luck away was beyond arrogant. Umi absolutely could not accept that.

Adventure was waiting, right over there! It was only polite to run for it until their lungs gave out!

Fortunately, the fairy, Toko, was better with words than she looked. By offering the teacher the choice between losing her memories and returning to normalcy, and fighting together with her students as a magical girl, she had convinced her. Now nothing would get in the way of Umi's adventure.

Though grudgingly, Ms. Himeno accepted, and all of them followed Toko's instructions, preparing for their counterattack by heading out to where they would intercept their opponents.

Toko chose an intersection about a hundred yards from the school, heading in the direction of the mountains. No shops or institutions were visible from that point, except the school. Aside from a few sparse houses, the most this area had was a parking lot. Though the road was wide enough, it was in particularly poor condition with cracks large and small running through the asphalt. It was afternoon, but there were few pedestrians or cars passing through. Still, the number was more than zero.

"This is where you'll fight back against the evil mages."

"But if we fight here, won't people see us?" asked Umi. "Isn't magic generally supposed to be a secret?"

"It is, but this is an emergency situation. When things are this bad, you fiddle with the witnesses' memories after. It'll be fine as long as we can withdraw before the police and firefighters come."

According to Toko, the evil mages might be able to detect the presence of magical girls. That was why Umi and the others had to detransform and go hide. Each of them was directed to a hiding spot where they returned to human form and waited patiently. After learning about their wonderful powers, going back to being human to wait for the fight made Umi rather uneasy. Looking over, she saw that Funny Trick—Kayo Nemura—seemed anxious, too, as

she looked up at the traffic light. She'd also been restless the whole way there, peeking into the garbage bin next to the vending machine, jumping at the littlest noises, tensing every time a car passed. She was acting extremely suspicious.

Umi grabbed Kayo firmly by the head and yanked it up. "Listen. There's no point in hiding if you're gonna be poking your head outta the bushes."

"S-sorry."

"I get that you're worried. But right now, we've gotta believe in Toko."

Umi looked at the smartphone in her hand. The signal hadn't come yet.

Toko had disappeared from her perch on top of the traffic light. She was just invisible, though, and she was still there, with a magical phone lying beside her. When the enemy came, she would give the order to everyone. That was the plan.

Umi and Kayo were hiding in the lilac thicket beneath the traffic light. The class rep and the teacher were using a car in the parking lot as cover, while the two first-years were hiding in the shadow of a cement-block wall around a house for sale. The Arabian dancer girl was apparently taking cover in a ditch. Umi was impressed she could bring herself to hide in a place like that.

She could have sworn the setting sun had been visible earlier, but now it was covered by thick, gloomy, murky black clouds. It was November. Now that they'd changed back to human form, she felt cold, as if she'd freeze from staying still. She tugged the collar of her jacket in and hugged her arms to herself. Directly inhaling the cold wind made the inside of her nose sting. She scowled at herself for being bothered by something so trivial as the temperature. If something this minor was getting to her, she needed better powers of concentration.

This was her first real fight as a new magical girl. Was that what was making her nervous? She reached out to the sword hanging from her hip, but her hand swiped through air. She recalled that she wasn't transformed right now and scowled again.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. If you've got time to be worried about me, then worry about yourself."

Kayo seemed uneasy. She always did when she was with Umi. But usually, Umi would smile and say, "I'm providing you with

some entertainment, so it's cool," and that would be it. But when Umi herself looked uneasy, those weak justifications didn't hold up.

Oh. Now she got it. Umi hadn't felt this in so long, she'd forgotten what it was. It wasn't fear but a premonition. Something was approaching, something that would threaten her life, even now that she had Captain Grace's power. Her intuition had acted up like this multiple times before, and these were the instincts animals followed to avoid danger. But Umi recognized the danger and braved it. Acknowledging its presence was enough.

Let's get ready for this adventure. Umi began her routine for coping with peril, taking long but shallow breaths. She relaxed the senses in the back of her mind. This was something other people never got, even if she tried to explain it to them. She tensed her nerves, and the little things ceased to matter. She exhaled out all the air inside her body. When her lungs were empty, she forced out one more breath. Even though she was lying low in a thicket with cold wind blowing through it, her body grew warmer.

Quietly, the excitement built inside her. She wasn't irritated anymore, even looking at uneasy Kayo.

"…They're coming." Toko's voice came from Umi's smartphone; they'd been connected in a call this whole time. The timbre of her voice was the same, just significantly quieter. The two words carried a tingling anxiety.

They couldn't transform yet. Umi glanced along the road from the thicket to see a white station wagon rolling down the road. No other people or cars. She checked the sign by the road, and it said the speed limit was thirty miles per hour. The station wagon was driving about five miles below that. It slowed down even further and then pulled onto the shoulder about twenty yards from the light and stopped.

Her stomach was gurgling. Sweat from her neck was dripping down into her armpits. The lilac thicket swayed in the wind, and the tall weeds fluttered. Kayo gulped. Umi's senses captured every little detail. Her concentration was fully engaged. Once she had processed everything, she focused on the station wagon. Smiling with just her lips, she thought, *Not bad.*

The door of the station wagon opened, and someone stepped out from inside. They were wearing a coat with a hood that hid their face and expression. Under this cold sky, they were wearing a well-known brand of sneakers with no socks.

“Toko.” It was the voice of a young woman, but it had a threatening edge. She addressed the hidden fairy as if she were plainly visible.

Toko replied in a casual, teasing tone. “You took longer than I thought.”

“Do you want this to hurt, or will you come quietly? Take your pick.”

Uh-huh, she seems to be a bad guy, all right.

“I don’t really like either option.”

Toko revealed herself. That was the signal.

Umi, now the magical girl Captain Grace, drew her sword as she leaped out. Behind her, she could hear Kayo tearing up the concrete road as she ran. The teacher, class rep, and the two first-years all sprang out of hiding in the same instant, too. Everyone had transformed. The Arabian dancing girl snaked up into the sky before descending to follow the station wagon.

☆ Funny Trick

She thought they were all nuts. She’d been hanging around Umi Shibahara for a long time, so she wasn’t as bad. Her crazy antics were nothing new.

But Mine Musubiya had an intellectual image, as befitting her title of “class representative.” The two first-year girls, wearing their school uniforms strictly according to regulation standard, had struck her as diligent students. Ms. Himeno had a baby face, but she’d lived about twice as long as Kayo and the rest, so she *should* possess commensurate life experience. These people had not seemed open to an avant-garde lifestyle like Umi. Or so Kayo had thought.

It was like a bad dream. She’d been dragged into this cosplay magical-girl army attacking these evil mages, with no permission to resist. Not even knowing who their enemy was, they were all converging on the vague idea of evil in this station wagon. This was no different from robbery or terrorism.

The woman in the coat yelled something into the car as she prepared to meet Umi’s attack. Kayo was a little surprised by how fast she reacted. She didn’t just have the speed of a magical girl; it looked like she’d sensed their attack. Umi, who’d dashed out in

front faster than any of the others, swung her sword in a sideways arc, and her opponent evaded it with ease.

Though she breathed a sigh of relief, Kayo was shocked. The sigh was because she was thankful their enemy had avoided Umi's decisive, potentially fatal swing, and the shock was because the enemy was quick enough to avoid the magical-girl attack.

"Why?! Why are there…so many?!" the woman yelled. At the same time, her coat ripped, and her sneakers flew off.

Underneath her coat was a kimono, but the hem ended four inches above the knee, boldly exposing her thighs. There was no mistaking that she was connected to all this: Her face was flawless, and she had bunny ears on top of her head.

Then the driver poked their head out from inside the car, too. This one was dressed in a black coat, sunglasses, and a black fedora, like some sort of Mafia lackey. "We didn't expect nearly this many! Retreat for now!"

The mobster pulled out some kind of black stick, thrust it out the window, and aimed its tip at them. Flaming thumb-sized projectiles shot out of it with a *bang, bang, bang*. Despite the Mafia motif, the person was actually a mage. Kayo—now the magical girl Funny Trick—knocked down the stone-like projectiles flying toward her with her wand, even as she felt like bursting into tears.

The machine-gun fire of flaming stones had the element of surprise. Kayo was, in fact, very startled. But the weapon's speed was no match for the reflexes of magical girls. Swords and ribbons batted the fire bullets away, and they quickly vanished. As the girls defended themselves, the mobster mage kept on shooting as they drove, spinning around to do a U-turn. As the car sped off, a casting net shot out of it with a *pop*. It was large but slower than the fire projectiles, and since it couldn't kill them, the girls took fewer pains in dodging it. But the net did catch one girl: the one dressed like a European-esque delivery person. She was tangled up in the net, struggling.

Saying it aloud would be mean, but that one was sort of slow. Kayo recalled that girl was one of the two first-years.

With the net toss as its parting shot, the car attempted to speed away. The rainbow girl chased after it, and the bunny-eared girl stayed behind to fight.

The Arabian dancer girl was delivering alternating blows from up in the sky, but Bunny Ears avoided them as she restrained the

girl in the wedding dress and fended off the blade of the pirate captain, Umi, even though it was moving so fast Kayo could hardly see it.

Kayo looked down at her feet. The postal delivery girl was struggling inside the net. She couldn't tear it, but it wouldn't come off, either, and the more she thrashed, the more it seemed to entangle her. *The poor thing,* Kayo thought. She clearly wasn't good at fighting, and yet she'd been brought out here anyway. Thinking back to when the fairy had first shown up, she remembered one girl had seemed less than enthusiastic about the whole thing. She'd been dragged along by her friend, hadn't she? Just like Kayo.

Kayo addressed the girl at her feet. "Don't move. Curl up as small as you can." She smiled as kindly as she could as the girl peered up at her in terror. Kayo was surprised at herself for keeping it together enough to show compassion to someone else and scoffed at herself. *Maybe I'm just pitying a kindred spirit.* The postal delivery girl did what Kayo said. Inside the net, she held her knees and balled up, and Kayo flung her cape over the girl, completely covering her body.

Kayo—the magical girl Funny Trick—could use her magic to swap the positions of any two hidden things. What she did was no different from sleight of hand, except without the sleight.

On the way there, Kayo had checked the garbage can beside the vending machine. The only thing inside was an empty can. In order for Funny Trick to use her magic, she had to check the positions of the things she would swap and ensure that neither would be seen by anyone.

Kayo tapped her cape with the tip of her wand, and the bulge of fabric collapsed like a deflated balloon. When she peeled it away, lying there was an empty can.

She'd managed to save the girl for now. *This magic can come in handy*, she thought, looking toward the vending machine. She spotted the delivery girl poking her head out of the garbage can, eyes darting over her surroundings.

The station wagon raced by at high speed, and the rainbow magical girl chasing after it stopped by the garbage can to drag the delivery girl out of it and yell, "The two of us can handle the car!"

She dragged the delivery girl along, in hot pursuit of the fleeing station wagon. Kayo doubted the postal girl even understood what was going on. Once more, the phrase *pity for a kindred spirit* came to

Kayo's mind.

☆ Captain Grace

The girl in the rainbow-colored costume and the delivery girl were chasing after the station wagon. With a magical girl's strong legs, they weren't going to fall behind. Captain Grace could leave them be. She had to deal with the other one.

Bunny Ears was agile. When the Arabian dancing girl hurled something invisible at her, she evaded it with a hop backward, and when the ballerina lashed out with her billowing ribbons, Bunny Ears grabbed them all at once and yanked to pull her opponent off balance, then followed up with a kick. The ballerina tried to block it with a wall of ribbons, but Bunny Ears kicked right through it and sent her skidding across the road.

The fleeing car or Bunny Ears: If Captain Grace was to choose one opponent, it'd be the latter. That one looked like more fun. Thinking about a fight with another magical girl, Umi couldn't help the adventurous spirit boiling over within her.

Bunny Ears was a tough opponent. Attacking her didn't ruffle her feathers. She avoided the Arabian dancing girl's airborne strikes easily, dodging the assaults from all directions in a display of impressive technique. Even though some of the attacks came from above and behind, the typical blind spots, she remained unscathed.

When Kayo carelessly swiped at her with her wand, Bunny Ears seized her arm, about to swing Kayo around when Umi caught her. Neither the girl in the wedding dress nor the Arabian dancing girl could really make a move. And the indecisive attacks from the variously sized ribbons failed to hit their mark. Everyone was acting frightened. Were they scared of the flame projectiles, or had they just been stunned by the strength of their enemies?

This is pathetic. She's unarmed! Umi railed at them all in her mind and examined her opponent once more.

Was Bunny Ears a kind of magical girl, too?

Just like Captain Grace, she was strong. What would happen if magical girls this powerful fought one another? She got excited just thinking about it.

Umi Shibahara's rule of thumb was to fight fair and square, face-to-face. So she circled around to come in front of Bunny Ears,

who was avoiding, blocking, and parrying attacks from the other magical girls. Captain Grace turned her one-sided blade around in her grip to swipe the dull end at the enemy, and Bunny Ears instantly squatted to dodge. Then, without even giving Umi the time to think *Oh, not bad*, Bunny Ears put her hand on the ground and kicked. Captain Grace didn't quite fully evade, and blood spurted from her thigh.

It was just a scrape, but that injury changed the entire vibe. Not within Umi herself but around her. Their group had become the magical girls of legend who fought to defeat evil mages like in a fairy tale, but actually using weapons and witnessing real bloodshed had shaken them. Kayo, the class rep, and their teacher weren't used to violence, unlike Umi.

Umi let out an intentionally loud laugh. If she acted cautious now, their enemy would make light of them, and her allies would lose morale. Their enemies were evil mages. If they were to back down, then the world would be destroyed. Raising her sword above her head, she swung it downward this time. It appeared to be another attack, but this was a feint. To the enemy, it should look like a large opening, and someone as good as Bunny Ears was bound to take advantage. Captain Grace would do just that.

C'mon, what's your next attack gonna be? Umi readied herself, but Bunny Ears turned and made a break for it. She doglegged past the circle of magical girls around her to make her escape. Captain Grace made a rushed swing at her with her sword, but Bunny Ears ducked low and slipped under the blade.

"I'm not letting you away, fluff-brains!" Perhaps the added insult was an expression of irritation toward herself. She swiped at the fleeing enemy, but Bunny Ears was already out of range. In desperation, Umi hurled her sword at her, but Bunny Ears sank low to the ground to duck and went on running on all fours like an animal, without ever slowing down.

It was frustrating to admit, but when it came to speed and agility over a short distance, Bunny Ears seemed to be superior. But they wouldn't know if she had the advantage when it came to long-distance endurance until they tested it. Since Umi didn't know, it was worth trying out. At any rate, she was hot on Bunny Ears's heels, and as long as she didn't let her out of sight, she had a chance at winning. Her enemy was escaping on all four limbs, just like a real rabbit, and Captain Grace chased close behind.

Sprinting straight down the road, they passed the front of the school, then dashed up the wall of the farmer's co-op to leap from that roof and land on top of the warehouse. They raced back down onto the ground, where Bunny Ears slowed down just a bit. The distance between them shrank.

—I've got her!

Umi reached out, but right before she could grab her enemy's collar, she felt an intense shock in her thigh. She jumped up and stopped, settling into a fighting stance. It hadn't come from Bunny Ears. There was no sign that she'd attacked Umi, and she was running off like a literal jackrabbit, and it wasn't long before she disappeared. Captain Grace's eyes darted this way and that.

Had someone attacked her? No. No one was paying attention to her now. The road was empty. Was it someone hiding? Where? There was only the sidewalk, the road, and the field behind her.

The spot where she'd felt that intense shock was the same spot where she'd gotten scratched after failing to dodge that kick. It wasn't a deep wound at all. She ran her finger along her thigh and found the scrape was still just a scrape, after all. She'd felt shock and pain but had taken no damage. Still, there was no way she had just imagined that.

All that remained was the fact that Umi had let Bunny Ears escape.

☆ Rain Pow

As is the case with every creature, including humans, each magical girl is different. And these differences are not restricted to their magics. Their physical abilities vary significantly as well.

There were many variants among the four girls fighting Bunny Ears, too: the Arabian dancer was fast; the pirate was also quite agile and strong. Compared to those two, the ribbon girl was much less gifted, but she could still fight. The most the wedding dress girl could probably do would be to create a diversion.

Running behind Rain Pow was a transformed Tatsuko Sakaki. She was slow-moving, even compared to the wedding dress girl. Frankly speaking, she was a slug. She also didn't look very strong, either.

Rain Pow called out to her with concern. "You okay, Tsuko?"

“Yeah…I’m okay.”

Still, it sounded like she could keep up with the car without getting winded, which was a relief.

Rain Pow continued after the car, maintaining a speed that would not leave Tatsuko behind but wouldn’t let the car pull away from them, either. If it kept driving in a straight line they would have to turn somewhere, as long as they weren’t going to take the bypass onto the highway. And once they turned, they wouldn’t be able to maintain their speed of over sixty miles per hour. If the girls ventured onto the highway, they’d be able to speed up without any reservations, too.

In other words, no matter which way the coin fell, it was no problem for them.

Rain Pow checked that Tatsuko was keeping up, occasionally shooting her concerned glances as they gradually accelerated. The station wagon nearly hit some pedestrians, and cars in the opposing lane were honking up a storm, but it didn’t slow down as it careened onto a side road.

—All right!

Kaori and Tatsuko were more familiar with this area. That car was headed for a narrow back road with a lot of turns. Even if they got through all that and came out onto the big road, it was packed with cars on their way back from work at this time of day. Traffic jams weren’t unusual.

But if they had to take their pick, a back road with fewer eyes was probably better than a major road with a lot of witnesses. Rain Pow kicked off a cement-block wall, using the recoil to send her into a pine tree, and from there, she grabbed some telephone wires and manifested a rainbow bridge that ran in a straight line from beneath her feet right to her goal. It took less than a second. This was Rain Pow’s magic.

And this wasn’t a regular rainbow; it was strong. Rain Pow ran atop it, making a beeline for the station wagon. Unlike the car, which was forced to turn with the road, she could ignore that and go straight ahead on her bridge through the air. Based on the car’s speed, she judged where it would end up and headed to that point.

But then something strange happened. Suddenly, smoke spouted out from the back of the station wagon. As Rain Pow jumped down from her rainbow bridge, she heard the station wagon crashing into something, and the ground shook. The gray smoke

spewed out of the car in an increasingly thick cloud.

Covering her mouth, Rain Pow looked up. Through the smoke, she could see what looked like figures running along the roofs. They were splitting up to run in two different directions.

So they put up a smoke screen to split ways and escape, huh?

"Wh-what do we do, Kaori?" asked Tatsuko.

"Um… The two of us could…split up, too? Or something?"

"Whaaa…?!"

"Okay! Let's do that! You chase that one, Tsuko! I'll go this way!"

"O-okay…"

Tatsuko's feet raced up the concrete-block wall to run along the roofs. Rain Pow was about to take off, too, when she felt eyes on her and turned to look back. A middle-aged woman was holding a child of about three and staring at Rain Pow with a look of terror on her face.

Rain Pow flung her right arm out in the woman's direction and cackled, "Happy Halloween!"

Once the woman's expression seemed to say, *"Oh, so it's that season?"* she ran up onto the rooftops.

☆ Weddin (Time remaining: twenty-three hours, fifty minutes)

Every one of Mine Musubiya's decisions was made on a risk-reward basis. Sometimes, her mother would tell her to think about things less in terms of profit and loss, but Mine didn't feel she was wrong.

It wasn't like she rejected ideas of friendship and love. If choosing them over money, status, and other important things was still the better option, then that was the choice that should be made. If the things to be gained through study were greater than the pleasure to be gained through play, then it was best to study. If the stress caused by studying outweighed its benefits, then it was best to seek relief in hobbies. In Mine's case, she would go rent anime DVDs to watch.

Compare and choose. This was simple and easy to understand. Even when some of her classmates talked behind her back, calling her a suck-up or a teacher's pet, if her status with that teacher was more important than that stress, she would choose that option. She would cut off those types of people and be kind to her other

classmates. Doing things like letting people copy her notes or listening to people's problems would gain her rewards. Mine was willing to peddle her benevolence for the advantage of popularity.

Now that she had the opportunity to fulfill the dream she'd had since she was little—to be a magical girl—she would do that, of course. Fighting some evil mages was no great price to pay, considering what she got in exchange.

The pirate returned, still looking alert. Bunny Ears was gone. It seemed she had let her quarry escape.

"Hey, hey! You can't let them get away!" Toko was hopping mad. She had lined the girls up in a semicircle, and now the pirate was bearing the brunt of her anger. When the rainbow girl and postal delivery girl came back empty-handed, too, she exploded. "Why did you let them get away?! You had the upper hand! It should have been easy for you! This went to pot because you got cocky! *Agh!* You dummy dumb-dumbs!"

"How can you talk like that when you weren't even fighting?" Mine spat out without thinking.

Toko's reaction was shrewd. "What? *You're* the one not even fighting. *I'm* the one who made you kids into magical girls, aren't I? Without me, you wouldn't have powers at all! If you're going to whine to me after you let them get away, then I can make someone *else* a magical girl!"

Mine bit her lip. She couldn't deny that venting her irritation like that had been thoughtless, but she was still angry. Right now, at least, Toko was not talking like someone who needed rescuing.

Seemingly ignoring Toko, the pirate took a step forward. "So this injury here." The pirate pointed to her thigh. It was bleeding. Mine looked at it, too. It was bleeding because the kick from Bunny Ears had skimmed her, right? "It felt like a giant blade was slicing it off, then like someone was grinding salt into it or going at it with a cheese grater and slathering it with wasabi. Was this, like, that person's magic?"

"Well, she's an evil mage. Of course she uses magic. More importantly, you've got to go chase after them *now* and beat them."

Timidly, the rainbow girl raised her hand. "The ones we were chasing used smoke to blind us. The car stopped, but the people inside ran away. We split up and searched the area, but we couldn't find them… But just in case, we did hide their car."

So Mine had been right to judge that a magical girl's strong legs could catch up with the car, and she'd most likely also been correct in thinking that they could handle a fight with its passengers. It hadn't even occurred to her that their targets would use confusion tactics on them to escape.

Mine heaved a sigh. "If we don't take a moment to reflect, we won't be able to move on to the next step."

"How long are you gonna spend reflecting?! Chasing them down comes first! They're evil mages! The world is gonna be in trouble! All your families are in danger!"

"It'd be best to think it all over rather than pursue them without a plan."

Having acquired the fantastic powers of magical-girl-hood, they had headed out to play with the evil mages, where they could use their powers to their hearts' content. Had Mine ever let her guard down? No, she had not. Their opponents were as strong as or stronger than they were. What's more, she had believed her own powers were strong, but they were nothing to speak of in a battle between magical girls. It had taken all she had just to visually track the back-and-forth between the pirate and Bunny Ears.

Her own magic, to compel people to keep promises, wasn't useful in battle, so there was no helping that. But still, the other magical girls might have had opportunities to use their own abilities. And if she didn't know what those abilities were, then she couldn't give orders to use them.

Actually, maybe she should be considering how she could use her own magic for combat purposes. Whatever the case, it would be best to know what the other girls' powers were.

"I'm with the class rep." The pirate indicated her agreement.

But there was something about the way she addressed her that left Mine unsatisfied. She shook her head and pointed to herself. "I'm not the class representative. I'm Weddin. My magical-girl name is Weddin." Since this was the character she'd become now, she should make that clear. When a villain was yelling the heroine's name, it was always, *"Damn you, Cutie Red!"* never, *"Damn you, Yoshiko Takanashi!"*

"I get it. We didn't even know each other's names, huh? We'll never be able to cooperate like that. So I'm Captain Grace. Glad to be working together, Weddin."

"Likewise, Captain Grace." They shook hands and gave each

other little nods. They were probably thinking along similar lines.

"I was champing at the bit, so I kinda rushed things. First, let's introduce ourselves. And not just our names but our powers, and if you can, how strong you are physically, too."

Toko complained so loudly that Weddin was impressed by the racket coming from such a tiny fairy. "Boo, boo! Forget that, and let's hurry! They're getting away!"

"Of course we're gonna catch those guys. Duh. But even so, we gotta give this thing our all, right? You know that saying about how even a lion runs its fastest to catch a rabbit?"

"Agreed," said Weddin.

"Mei will do that 'reflecting' thing, too."

"You're all driving me crazy! Agh! You have to beat those people up, or you can't become official magical girls, okay?!"

"Learning from our mistakes is all well and good, but… Why don't we do it somewhere else?" suggested the ribbon girl—that must be Ms. Himeno. Perhaps she worried people might see them, as she was surveying the area. The asphalt was so badly eroded and broken up that it would need repair after the pounding from their magical-girl legs. A trash can lay in the middle of the road. Plus, they all looked like cosplayers.

There had been no people around before, but there were houses nearby. Now some rubberneckers were looking their way, perhaps startled by all the commotion. An old couple doing farm work were pointing at them and commenting, "Must be filming some kind of TV show." A middle-aged woman who seemed like a housewife was staring at them as if they each had two heads. A five-year-old girl stood in awe, her eyes agleam.

This crowd was bound to get bigger. The Japanese police were a formidable bunch. Patrol cars were sure to show up soon, too.

CHAPTER 2
DROWNING IN LOVE AND HEARTS

☆ **7753**

A pro baseball player developing a special throw to strike out one ace batter after another. A cop surviving a fierce firefight in order to apprehend a vicious criminal, even after shotguns came into play. A private investigator gathering all those involved in a case into one big room to unveil deductions and brilliantly point out the culprit.

These popular and dramatic exploits can only be enjoyed in fiction. For the people who actually work in these professions, such stories are ultimately considered pure fantasy, good for a laugh or two at most. With magical girls, however, some of them would refuse to let such fantastical, daring feats remain in the realm of amusing anecdotes.

Since she specialized in mental health–focused guidance, the magical girl 7753 (pronounced na-na-ko-san) had plenty of opportunities to meet colleagues who desperately pursued that dream.

These girls spent their days in training, dreaming of fighting an as-yet unseen but powerful foe; it might be an evil archfiend, a malevolent god, a twisted science experiment, or an assassin sent from another world, and there were far more of these girls than professional baseball players seriously trying to develop their own unique pitch. 7753 didn't even have enough fingers to count all the ones she had met personally.

For example, one self-righteous girl had proclaimed she was training in preparation for the threat to the world that would one day come. Her training ground had been littered with the fragments

of boulders she had kicked to bits. Looking into her beautiful, sparkling eyes, 7753 hadn't been able to say, "If the world were ever on the verge of crisis, then some other, stronger person would handle it. There would be no job for you," or "Before you worry about any worldwide threats, worry about the safety of your hometown, please." The most she could manage was a weak smile on her face and an order to clean up the scattered rock debris.

7753 hadn't seen that girl again since her reassignment. Was she still dreaming about the "global crisis that was bound to happen someday" and destroying boulders?

Another magical girl had sought out "opponents worth fighting." To her, battle itself was the goal, and ideological issues such as "justice" and "evil" were mere distractions.

Once, that girl had touched the trunk of a big tree, and the opposite side tore open in a great blast, its leaves scattering all around. 7753 had thought, *I've seen that move in some manga before*, but she didn't say so. The most she could do was smile weakly and advise the girl to refrain from destroying the environment.

"This is what I am now," the girl had said. "My abilities have reached a point far beyond what your average magical girl can achieve."

"Uh-huh."

"Master! Give me a chance! Please give me a place to wield my powers!"

"Uh-huh…"

Before long, that girl was reassigned. 7753 could only pray she'd managed to go somewhere she could wield her power.

Sometimes, she was visited by scholarly types who believed, "Magic is a technology to be systematized and researched instead of something vague and indeterminate." There had been revolutionaries, too, who believed, "We have powers that surpass scientific civilization, so shouldn't we be the ones to rule and unify the world? Humans work only for their own selfish aims, and we can't leave this to them any longer." She also encountered patriots who insisted, "The power of magical girls is necessary to reverse the nation's decline and stagnation. We could be the greatest force for national security."

One magical girl had claimed, "We should go beyond our local districts and actively involve ourselves in human affairs. If magical girls make a serious effort to tackle these issues, we can prevent

tragedies," then flown off to the Middle East and toppled a government. Afterward, she had gone around beating up bad magical girls one after another, winning her the violent nickname of "the magical-girl hunter."

7753 had known for quite some time what the Magical Kingdom was using her for.

The ones they sent to her were all problem children drunk on their dreams and power. Then, after between one week and six months of time with her, they would be transferred elsewhere. Magical girls were sent to her and taken away, one after another, like a conveyor belt.

7753 was obligated to hand in reports about them. So she wrote them up based on the information she learned through her magical ability and submitted them.

7753's special power was data visualization. There was nothing noble or challenging about what she did. Her ability and the results she got from it were quite insignificant.

She would examine a subject through her magical goggles and see the great variety of data displayed in them. They showed her something like a status screen in a role-playing game. When the subject was in her goggles' sights, there would sound an electronic *beep-beep-beep*, and then the data would display. Just by adjusting the dial, she could attain practically limitless information, from the broader parameters of intelligence, endurance, and combat power, to more fine-grained detail like arm strength, grip strength, pinch strength, finger strength, fingernail hardness, etc. And the information she could learn was not just limited to traits that could be expressed in numbers. It included everything from hobbies to likes to even—if the subject was a magical girl—her own unique magic. The numerical values of abilities were displayed in heart symbols, and sentences were written in a very cutesy, childlike manner, all oddly typical of a magical girl.

This ability was useful to the Magical Kingdom for uncovering magical girls who could pose trouble. No matter how you tried to hide things, you couldn't deceive 7753's magic, and undetected problem children became exposed problem children so that the Magical Kingdom could know. Though most of the problem children didn't even try to hide it.

7753 calmly completed the tasks assigned to her. If this was the

work the Magical Kingdom wanted from her, then there was nothing for it but to meet their demands.

It wasn't as if she hadn't come up with other ways of using her powers. She could have gone to a bigger city to search for criminals to unmask. She could set out to countries where terrorism was rampant and round up the dangerous people who lived in hiding among innocent civilians.

Those things would surely have been a worthwhile use of her magic. But she wasn't going to oppose the Magical Kingdom to do it. If they demanded she use her powers to uncover these problem children, then she would go along with that.

Seven years had passed since Kotori Nanaya had gained the powers of the magical girl 7753, and that young magical girl brimming with hopes and dreams was now a veteran. She was more world-weary now. She wasn't drunk on her own power, either. Tons of magical girls out there were more powerful than she was, and even if she did seek out ultimate strength, the only one to decide how that would be used was the Magical Kingdom.

The Magical Kingdom was not suffering financial stress, yet they kept a tight budget. Basically, they were cheapskates. As a rule, magical girls were volunteers who slaved away for no pay, and if you didn't like it, you were told to quit—often rather frankly, depending on the person. 7753 had heard some graphic rumors about some magical girls being on welfare so they could focus on their magical-girl activities. But those were probably just rumors.

Even the unabashedly exploitative Magical Kingdom did sometimes pay money. They doled out a regular chain of treats in the form of a salary to hold on to certain personnel they wanted to keep in their sights.

Only a very few magical girls received this salary, like the managers who coordinated a whole region, or the scouts who discovered talent, or those with abilities, skills, experience, or magic that would allow them to work for the Magical Kingdom in a specialized capacity.

7753 was one of these individuals, and as one affiliated with the Magical Girl Resources Department—like human resources, but for magical girls—she received a regular paycheck from the Magical Kingdom.

While this was an honor, it also narrowed her options. If she'd had a "normal," human job, even if she were to quit being a

magical girl, she could make a living. But unlike those who did this work as a side job, a full-timer had nowhere to run.

There are many jobs, like professional go or shogi player, singer, actor, entertainer, manga artist, novelist, or pro athlete, that will leave you with no other marketable skills if you fail. But of all these careers, magical girl is worst of all. If a shogi player or manga artist fails, they still retain their experience and skills. But a magical girl isn't even left with that, since her memory will be erased. She becomes a completely blank slate, literally left with nothing, a human with no skills, no experience, and no work history, flung right out into the middle of the raging waves of the world.

Each time this thought would pop back up in her mind, 7753 would shudder. She had no options left in life now other than being a magical girl.

Magical girls with dreams, those who wanted to get stronger and shoot for their goals, were beautiful. More than a few times, 7753 had felt a longing to be like that. But it had never gone beyond longing. People always admire those who live a life they can't. She didn't actually have to follow that same path herself. 7753 did not live in dreams but in reality.

A full-time magical girl did not receive benefits, but 7753's cash income was not by any means small. Keeping moderation in mind as much as possible, refraining from wasteful spending and saving up her income, just recently she had finally managed to save ten million yen. Her pocketbook gave her a solid sense of satisfaction, and looking at the numbers, she quietly cried.

7753 had heard of some magical girls who had amassed wealth by doing evil, but she wasn't going to take any risks. Getting fired over something like that would be getting her priorities backward. She would save slowly and steadily. She didn't mind doing it the hard way.

Her saving was going well, but it still wasn't enough. She would have a long life after she quit being a magical girl. The house she was living in now had been built more than thirty years ago. After rebuilding and renovations and various other things, ten million yen would be used up in a flash.

A few years ago, both her parents had passed away, one after the other. Left to her were some meager savings and stock certificates, as well as their house and land parcel. She had only

met her relatives on the occasion of her parents' death. She hadn't seen them since.

The time after her parents' passing had been full of upheaval.

First, her boss was demoted. Her direct superior, the one person she might have been able to rely on aside from her parents, had been very much a competent woman, the type who always looked crisply put-together. She had guaranteed 7753, "If anything happens, I'll cover for you." But due to the misconduct of a different subordinate, something 7753 had no power over, her boss had been demoted. And even though they had worked together for years, she hadn't been able to say good-bye.

Immediately afterward, she had met the replacement.

The replacement was a vaguely capricious-seeming magical girl. She didn't strike 7753 as reliable, compared to her former boss. According to hearsay, she was an up-and-comer who had shot up through the ranks, and the nastier rumors said she'd just got her way up through nepotism thanks to someone in her family with deep connections to magical girls. Her nature was as elusive as the airy impression she gave off.

If 7753 were to use her magic, she may have been able to find out what sort of person she really was, but 7753 had always removed her goggles in front of her boss. Of course. Using her goggles on her boss was bound to offend her. And it was rude to access someone's data without permission, no matter who it was.

Her new boss had taken 7753's goggles in hand with deep interest and said, "I'll take these for now." 7753 explained that without them, she would be unable to perform her regular duties, but her boss didn't listen and just carried them off. Then, a few days later, the goggles were sent back to her by mail.

Attached to them was a letter that read, *They've been improved. We've made it so that the goggles can transfer information directly to us, so from now on, written reports will be unnecessary.* 7753 balled the letter up and threw it in the trash. What an openly contemptuous way to talk to someone! The letter also informed her of many things even she hadn't been aware of, like how if she detransformed while the goggles were away from her, the goggles would remain where they were, and that they could be modified despite their magical nature. At that time, she was too angry to be surprised.

Not only had her boss taken away her goggles, the foundation of 7753's magical-girl existence, she had tweaked them without

asking permission or apology. What she could learn from this was that her boss was selfish and pragmatic. She hadn't looked through the goggles to acquire this information, but she was certain this impression was true. The new boss didn't seem any more reliable than her previous one—in fact, it seemed to 7753 that if she looked to her for help for the wrong thing, she was apt to be discarded.

At the time, 7753 had lamented her wretched life. Being placed under such a miserable boss made her depressed.

Eventually, months passed, spring became summer, and summer turned to fall.

People are self-interested creatures. As her life went on by without any serious problems, she came to think, *It's actually easier to not have to write reports. I like it.* The information 7753 could acquire with her magic was extremely detailed, and that had made for a lot of time taken writing reports. Thanks to the modification on her goggles, there was no more of that, and she could take it easy.

What's more, she had pessimistically believed she'd be stuck with a pitiful salary until her death, but it was raised by 30 percent. She was even grateful to her boss, like a capable employee working briskly under an elite. The evening she heard about her raise, she opened up the three foreign-made dark beers she'd won from a raffle in the shopping district. The bottles were shaped differently from the Japanese standard, with an interesting acute angle to them. Being the first alcohol she'd had in a long time, the beer hit her hard. The thrills of humanity were pretty weak, compared to being a magical girl.

Having some financial leeway eased her heart. When cleaning her house, she even started paying close attention to the details, like doorframes and window frames. She switched from herbicides to weeding her yard by hand and even considered planting some vegetables.

And so 7753's lifestyle became more fulfilling, and going to work, which had felt like a hassle before, was now something she could do with a smile. And so it had been until now.

She woke up and gazed vacantly at an unfamiliar ceiling until she remembered that she was staying at a hotel. This was her first business trip in a long while. Someone else was doing the cooking and cleaning for her. The Magical Kingdom was paying for her food

and transportation costs. Though the room was so tiny that she hit her head getting into the bath, the hotel conferred a rare happiness to someone who lived on her own. Magical girls mainly worked at night, so she went back to sleep once, and then a second time, savoring the blissful experience. Once it was evening, she leisurely rose from bed.

After getting up, Kotori Nanaya immediately washed her face. She had to, or she wouldn't wake up properly. The magical facial cleanser her old boss had given her thoroughly cleansed away the excess oil.

At a sparsely populated buffet, she read the evening paper over a salad and some sausage. The crunchy texture of the lettuce was pleasant. As she spread apricot jam on her bread, she quenched her thirst with lukewarm milk. She shot a vague glance at the TV. An evening news show was on. Seeing the teenage girls on-screen giggling exuberantly, she thought, *Aw, they're so pretty*.

If she hadn't gotten these powers, maybe she would have had such an adolescence.

All she'd ever thought about was being a magical girl, and her life as a human had been secondary. She'd figured stuff like fashion and dieting and makeup had nothing to do with her, but getting another look at her face in the mirror now, maybe she looked older than her age. Gold will sparkle beautifully even without polish, but iron merely rusts.

Since Kotori had come all this way to B City, she'd made a reservation at a beauty salon. It was so famous it had even been featured in a magazine. She told herself that ultimately, she was just taking the opportunity while she was on her business trip.

Wait, no, it's not just a side thing, she corrected herself. This wasn't a waste of time to begin with. It was a necessary expense. Balancing things between her human life and magical-girl life would make her time more fulfilling. Or it should. It was true that if she stayed transformed, she could cut a lot of expenses—primarily, food. When she'd first become a magical girl, she'd lived that way to save money.

But just because transforming would make her pretty didn't mean she could neglect her grooming when she was in human form. With each year that passed, the weight of that fact became heavier. Once you were an adult, you had to function in a social environment even just going out to do a little shopping.

Kotori went back to her room and checked her schedule book. She'd never carried around anything this stylish before. It was a pretty fancy one, with a leather cover. If it hadn't been for her raise, she never would have bought something like this.

Who knew getting a raise could feel this good? It was like the world had done an about-face. She was very much struck by how systems like age-based promotion, periodic raises, and lifetime employment would get such a firm grip on people's hearts.

The plan for today was to meet with a magical girl who would come to her for training. That was scheduled late at night, so during the day, she would go to the beauty salon for her appointment. She made a mental note of what she needed to do and what she wanted to do, and she was carefully culling the list when her magical phone rang. It was from her boss. It was unusual for her to call instead of messaging.

Kotori transformed into 7753 and took her magical phone in hand. Her posttransformation voice was different from her human one. Answering a work call without transforming was bound to get her needled for carelessness. Magical-girl business manners were tedious in the oddest ways.

"Hello, this is 7753."

"We have emergency business. Inspectors have been sent to B City." 7753 could sense the anxiety in her voice. "B City" had to refer to this town, where 7753 was currently staying for her business trip.

She was confused by the "inspectors" part, as she wasn't sure who was to be inspecting what, and took several moments to think before responding, "Inspectors?"

"Investigators. Who investigate magical-girl crimes."

"Oh, I see."

"The inspection team acquired information that a dangerous criminal was in hiding in the city and went there. They came into contact with the criminal not long ago, but the enemy's forces were greater than anticipated, so the team has made a retreat."

Reflexively, 7753's hand clenched her magical phone. "So what does that mean, exactly?"

"I'm told there have been casualties, and there is also a request for support from the magical girls in the area. That includes you, since you're in B City for your business trip. I really want to have one of my people there. You're fortunate enough to be there

already, so you'll go."

This wasn't fortunate. It was the worst kind of bad luck.

"If it's that dangerous, I'll just get in the way."

"You can't leave the city anyway. The Department of Diplomacy has erected a barrier with the request for support as their pretext."

"Pardon?"

"Officially, they say this is to prevent the criminal from fleeing. But to the magical girls within the city, it's tantamount to being locked in. The barrier prevents any magical elements from passing through. That includes anyone in human form."

"That's crazy!"

"Since you can't get out, at any rate, it'll be much safer for you to stick together with the investigation specialists rather than be alone. If you act on your own without knowing what you're doing, the team might decide you're one of the criminal's cohorts and attack you."

"Well, but—"

"I'll message you the details. You don't have much time. Report in secret. Don't make any decisions on your own, no matter how trivial. And take care of yourself." Her final remark seemed to 7753 like a perfunctory afterthought, but maybe it was just her victim complex talking.

Her routine was falling apart. For a while, she was dazed, unable to think at all. Feeling as if some outside force was pulling her strings, 7753 checked her messages. There was one from her boss. She immediately opened it and ran her eyes over the text. It said she was to meet the inspection team at the hotel in front of the station. The meeting time was very soon. Her boss urged her to go while in human form.

In a stupor, she thought, *I'll cancel my appointment at the salon, for now*.

Kotori decided to walk around town before going to meet the inspection team. When she stepped outside, the sky was covered in thick clouds—a dark, ashen canopy stretching endlessly to the limits of the horizon. It had been brighter inside with the lights on than it was outside. Even though it was late afternoon, it was so dark it seemed night was about to fall. It was like a symbol of her fate. She felt weary.

It was five minutes walking from the hotel where she'd been

staying to the intersection. The city limits were right close by. The air didn't taste particularly nice. The briskness of it stung her throat. It was just a semirural area.

The intersection near the station had a lot of foot traffic for the edge of town; men and women who looked like white-collar workers and students in coats walked by without giving her a glance. They all stopped together at the red light, then at the green light, they all started up again. Kotori walked along with them. But before she could reach the other side of the crosswalk, her forehead hit an invisible wall, and then she doubled over. She hadn't just run into a hard wall—the moment she'd touched it, she couldn't even stay upright. She wanted to yell, but her voice caught in her throat. Her head felt numb all the way to the core. Her vision went red for an instant, then gradually eased back. Wrapping her arms around herself, she slumped to the ground. A powerful wave of dizziness washed over her. She couldn't breathe. She wasn't even sure which direction was down.

She had been walking on the edge of the crosswalk, so nobody bumped into her from behind, but she couldn't avoid the suspicious looks from people walking down the street. Rolling, crawling, scrambling, she made her way back to the sidewalk, and when people addressed her with concern, asking if she was okay, she waved them off with a weak smile and finally stood up using a roadside tree for support. The corners of her mouth felt cold, and when she ran her hand over her lips, she found they were covered in saliva. She pulled out her handkerchief and wiped it off.

So this was the barrier. Regular people might come and go as normal, but 7753 couldn't proceed any farther.

Though she'd been told that anything magical would be repelled, she hadn't thought it would hurt this badly. Even just touching it would be sure to take you out of the fight. She shuddered to think about what would have happened if she had unknowingly tried to leave the barrier in a car or train.

Having given up and about ready to go back, Kotori noticed the green pedestrian crossing light had stopped blinking, and rushed off in a panic.

Pulling out her magical phone, she checked the time. It was only a bit longer until the meeting. With a light swipe of her finger, she first checked a map of the area, then located the nearby

playground and headed in its direction. Sitting down on the bench, she opened up her messages and browsed the documents her boss had sent to her.

The documents included information on the criminal, although their name and affiliation was as-yet unknown—basically a mystery killer. As she read up on their MO of hacking up victims with a large blade, Kotori felt herself wilting. She was being forced to investigate someone like this?

All the victims were connected to the Magical Kingdom: whistle-blowers, administrators who had been scheduled to appear in court as important material witnesses, examiners who had supposedly accepted bribes, and magical girls rumored to have loaned items from the Magical Kingdom to organized crime. It was all written quite frankly. Kotori was shaken. She wondered if it was okay for her to know all these details, but at the same time, the fact that so many local magical girls had gone about their business completely oblivious to these events made her vaguely fearful. Just how many of them were killed in the line of duty?

But that was just the beginning.

Scrolling down the page, terms like “undercover investigation” and “double agent” and “cover-up” jumped out at her, and she immediately put her magical phone into sleep mode. She tossed it into the tote bag hanging from her shoulder as she stood. After two pats to the seat of her skirt, she bought a black coffee from the vending machine and returned to the bench. There was an old man fishing in the pond in the park. His life must be so carefree and easygoing. Kotori’s jealousy cut deep.

The dangerous job of investigating a criminal—more specifically, apprehending a criminal, a task she’d never been involved with before—had now been thrust upon her.

7753 had just happened to be in this city by coincidence, and her boss, who she had believed was a capable individual, had given her this preposterous order. Kotori’s instincts were right after all—her boss was a pragmatist who didn’t understand people’s feelings. She shouldn’t have trusted her just because she’d decreased 7753’s workload and given her a raise. But regret it as she might, it was already too late.

A capable supervisor like hers would also expect her subordinates to be capable, too. But what could she want from 7753? The most experience she had with violence was intervening

in a fight between drunks. No, her boss was not the capable type at all. She was an incompetent who mistakenly believed she was talented. If she *really* were capable, she would have a firm grasp of her subordinates' skills and say something like, "Some conflict may break out in B City, where you're staying right now, so please remain on standby in as safe a place as possible." 7753 griped furiously about her superior but she couldn't abandon the job she'd been assigned. It was rough working for the man—or the Kingdom, in this case.

Sipping her coffee slowly, Kotori checked her magical phone again.

She'd once heard that in the information field, sharing unsolicited secrets with someone could make them feel closer to you, and you could use that to drag them onto your side. Kotori couldn't help but feel as though she were being given information that she fundamentally shouldn't know. The coffee she'd drunk was hitting her stomach.

This wasn't simply a list of documents. Great pains had been taken to provide detailed explanations for the reader's sake.

Magical girls had been killed in their homes while they were detransformed, too. Their addresses were strictly managed; it wasn't information accessible to the general public of the Magical Kingdom. To say nothing of the fact that if you were high up enough to figure out secret identities, you'd have to be in the upper echelons or possibly right at the core of the organization. Suspicions were erupting among concerned personnel that a political purge by some power could be underway, ridding themselves of individuals who were inconvenient to them.

Within this cesspool of suspicions, various powers had offered their cooperation in this investigation. Among those were Kotori's own Magical Girl Resources Department and the Department of Diplomacy, which had erected this barrier. The purpose of the barrier might be to create an alibi: They had cooperated with the investigation, so they had no connection with the criminal. Their goal could be to let the criminal escape if things went well, or, if left with no choice, they would kill the criminal to silence them.

Even these details were explained in full, adding to Kotori's woe.

It wasn't as if she had absolutely no ambitions for promotion, but that was motivated by the plebeian desire to get a higher wage

for a better lifestyle. She had absolutely no desire to get involved in a tug-of-war between factions, assassinations, political purges, or anything like that. That was way too dangerous.

The inspection squad currently in B City was made up of three people. From the Inspection Department, there was Hana Gekokujou and Mana. There was also Archfiend Pam, who had been assigned to them from a different department. Hana Gekokujou and Mana were specialists in inspection and investigation. The documents said Archfiend Pam was currently attached to the Magical Kingdom's Department of Diplomacy, but she had been temporarily assigned to the team in a combat capacity, since her presence had been deemed necessary for arresting such a vicious criminal. With the addition of 7753, affiliated with the Magical Girl Resources Department, their mixed team was complete.

However, it was particularly unsettling that the Department of Diplomacy had clearly enlisted combat personnel. The part 7753 had just read, about the goal being to silence people, began to feel real. They might believe 7753 herself was there for similar reasons. The mere fact that she'd been forced onto their team was suspicious enough. They wouldn't welcome a compulsory addition.

Making up her mind to at least do her best not to arouse suspicion, she scrolled down to the next page.

The criminal's accomplice had been identified as the mascot Toko.

The recently developed state-of-the-art magical phones contained magical-talent search tools that had greater directivity than previous models, but the device also left a record of each use with Magical Kingdom inspection headquarters. This was a hidden function kept secret from all but the handful of people involved with the project.

Basically, this meant that the Magical Kingdom was keeping a close eye on how the function was used. All magical girls in active service had to have felt once or twice just how much of a sieve the Magical Kingdom's surveillance was. A certain number of troublemakers had always slipped through the net to work nasty side jobs. It was no surprise that those in power had decided to do something about the situation. As for the top secret observation part, that did make 7753 feel a little of the tight, suffocating stranglehold created by a secret police or a society full of moles and spies, but it was still better than an observational system with

massive leaks that let everyone do what they wanted.

This was the mechanism that had caught Toko. The mascot was a shrewd scout; her colleagues had described her behind her back as "the slave dealer." As could be surmised from her nickname, she was competent but had little love for magical girls. She would create them at random, and those who had talent, she would guide with care, but she didn't care at all what happened to the rest. Anytime a prospect seemed unlikely to gain Toko any prestige, she would easily rid herself of the girl. Rumor had it that when former recruits came to her for advice, she would treat them coldly. Her poorly formed policy was, *As long as they've got talent, I won't worry about the little things*, which meant she had raised a number of talented magical girls so far. But though they were talented in terms of ability, personality-wise… Well, you get the picture.

And so, since Toko had achieved some degree of success, she got priority distribution of the experimental new phone. She'd used it and, ultimately, been caught. She had been found at the scene of a certain crime and subsequently exposed. The victims had been brutally murdered by a large blade—something a mascot didn't have the strength to wield. Toko had been the one to use the magical phone, but someone else had carried out the crime. That someone had probably been discovered by Toko, a master at raising talent, and trained in secret—as a magical girl who specialized in killing.

The conclusion derived from the pattern of victims and Toko's position was Toko couldn't be the real one behind this. There was some other person, or organization, giving her orders. That was the reason that the upper echelons of the Magical Kingdom were filled with such trepidation about which departments would be involved with this. 7753 could deduce that this was also why she herself had been forced into this investigation unit.

Kotori tilted the can of coffee. A few drops fell onto her tongue, but after that, no matter how she shook the can, nothing more came out. Sighing, she tossed the empty container at the garbage bin by the vending machine and missed. The can rolled onto the pavement. Sighing one more time, she stood, picked it up, and put it in the garbage.

Before she left the park, she peeked into the bucket sitting beside the old fisherman. There was only water inside and no catch. Kotori sighed a third time, and the old man glared at her. Tugging

the lapels of her coat closer, she hurriedly left the park.

They were to meet in a karaoke parlor box. It was at a well-known chain that also had a branch in Kotori's hometown, but both the building itself and the parking lot at this one were much smaller and older. The automatic doors opened and closed stiffly, as if they were about to get stuck. Maybe rust was the cause, or perhaps the whole plot of land was sinking due to land subsidence, or the building could just be crooked. They all looked plausible.

She got the feeling that even the staff weren't all that friendly, but of course, she didn't let that show. Kotori informed them that she wanted to join up with the group in room number twelve and headed off that way.

Sound leaked from the doors on either side of her as she made her way through the hall. Business was booming. It seemed the place was more popular than she'd assumed. She stopped before a plate with the number twelve written on it. Before entering the room, she checked her palms. They were shining with sweat. She wiped them off with her handkerchief.

It wasn't wearing a coat indoors that had made her palms so sweaty—it was nerves. Switching her bag from her right to her left shoulder, she cleared her throat two, three times, then knocked. The sounds coming from inside abruptly stopped.

"…Come in."

"Pardon me." Kotori pushed the door open.

Warm air caressed her face through the gap. She focused her gaze and faltered.

There were four magical girls.

—Four?

She was confused. Why was there an extra girl? She hadn't been listed in the briefing. What was the meaning of this? All four were already transformed.

One girl was in a miniskirt *yukata* and had bunny ears. Another wore a black dress and coat. She had little horns on her head. Both appeared to be in their early teens—typical magical girls.

The third girl, however, was less typical. She wore a ninja-style costume and had a scar from a sword wound over her left eye. The arm cover on her left arm was loose below the elbow, too. One eye and one arm. Her remaining right eye glinted as it caught Kotori's gaze, and Kotori reflexively looked away. She felt cold shivers

coming from the pit of her stomach. This magical girl oozed violence.

The fourth girl wasn't scary, but something about her felt off. Like the other three, she appeared to be in her teens, yet she was somehow different. She wore round, frameless glasses, her hair was gathered casually in the back, and her costume was plain—less a costume, and more casual, like normal clothes. She wore a plain navy-blue shirt, a loose tunic the color of fresh green grass, a gray cardigan, and beige cotton pants. She'd left a brown coat folded over the armrest of the sofa, and on her feet were sneakers of some foreign brand Kotori didn't recognize. There was a faint sprinkle of freckles on her cheeks, and you could sense a strong will in her furrowed brow. She wore an irritated expression.

The girl with the glasses glared at the newcomer. Kotori didn't miss the creases between her eyebrows. "And here comes the amateur who doesn't even know the basics of investigation, barging in to mess up the crime scene."

"Come on, now." The bunny-eared girl raised a hand in mediation. "She's helping us out. You can't talk like that." The girl stood up and bowed her head. Her bunny ears bounced along with it. They were so cute that in spite of herself, 7753 wanted to reach out and touch them. "You're 7753, right? My name is Hana Gekokujou."

"Oh, yes. Thank you for your courtesy. I'm 7753." 7753 hurriedly bobbed her head down and up.

Hana introduced the others one by one, gesturing to each girl as she went. "The glasses girl over here is the chief of our team, Mana."

"Who're you calling *glasses girl*?"

Ignoring Mana's obvious displeasure, Hana continued. "This is Archfiend Pam. Like you, she'll be working together with us on this operation."

The girl in the dress coat gave a small smile and dipped her head, saying, "Good to be working with you." This was apparently Archfiend Pam. Now that it was pointed out to her, Pam did indeed seem to have a devilish motif; her dress coat was all black, and the wiggling, eel-like thing poking out from the bottom of her coat might be her devil tail. The word "archfiend" was probably why descriptors like "lips redder than blood" and "hair blacker than darkness" were coming to mind. However, her smile seemed more

unreliable than kind, and her sleepy-looking eyelids were more Buddha-like than devilish.

"And that's Ripple."

Expression blank, the one-eyed, one-armed ninja bowed her head.

Ripple. That sounded familiar. Or maybe she looked familiar? She'd seen that name somewhere before, but it hadn't been on the list of the inspection team members. Kotori dug through her memories, wondering where on earth she had seen that name. It was recently. She had the feeling it was pretty important…but she couldn't remember.

"You're a bit slow on the uptake," Mana muttered loud enough to be heard. "How long are you going to stand there? We have no time as it is."

"Oh, of course. Sorry."

Do karaoke boxes have a seating order? Kotori had never heard of such a thing. The girls were sitting on a couch surrounding the table, with what looked like documents spread out on it. From where Kotori was facing, in the back on the left was Mana, with Hana sitting beside her, and then a space, then Ripple. Archfiend Pam was alone on the right side, sitting daintily and slightly removed from the rest of the group.

Ripple stood and opened up a space for Kotori to sit. Right now, even this small kindness was something to be grateful for. *Sorry for assuming based solely on your appearance that you only know how to fight,* she mentally apologized, sitting down on the sofa.

"First, remove your coat."

"Right." As Mana instructed, Kotori took off her coat. There was a coat hanger by the door, but in order to use that, she'd have to make Ripple get up again. So she silently placed her coat atop of the backrest.

"And transform."

"Right." Kotori transformed into 7753. She'd never transformed in front of others, so she was a little embarrassed. She then took off her goggles and placed them on top of the table.

"All right, well, I'll explain things one more time for the latecomer." Irritation dripped from every word out of Mana's mouth. 7753 quietly looked down.

"You will remain in magical form at all times. Until the criminal is apprehended…" Mana glanced over at Archfiend Pam.

Archfiend Pam tilted her head and gave a quiet smile. Mana harrumphed and continued. "…or killed, you're not permitted to detransform. We're dealing with a vicious criminal, here, and there's no guarantee they won't ambush us. Until I have judged that there will be no more combat, absolutely do not undo your transformation. Do not under any circumstances assume you will be fast enough to transform after you're attacked. Some birdbrains don't understand just how much faster magical-girl reaction time is compared to a human's."

It felt like 7753 was being attacked for carelessly strolling in as a human. She ducked her head even lower.

"There's already been one casualty. Be sure to stay on guard at all times."

The weight of the word "casualty" came down hard on her chest. If there would be another death, then who would it be? If one of the group was a lot less used to combat, then they were the prime candidate. Just thinking about it made her shiver.

Mana glanced over at Archfiend Pam and continued. "The barrier erected by the Department of Diplomacy will last twenty-four hours. And once it wears off, they won't be able to just throw it back up again. We will apprehend the criminal while the barrier is still active."

Stupid Department of Diplomacy, 7753 whined in her head. *Why did you have to do this?* But even if she were to voice these complaints, nobody would listen.

"While we're moving from place to place, hide your costume under a long coat with a big hat or scarf and such. A surgical mask is also a good idea, since more than a few people will be wearing them to prevent seasonal flu and colds. Those who did not come with attire prepared must purchase it themselves."

Now 7753 understood the reason Mana had told her to take off her coat—because if she transformed without removing it, the coat would disappear until she canceled her transformation. But she still had no hat or surgical mask. She'd have to pick some up. Would the Magical Kingdom foot the bill? For now, she would hold on to the receipts.

"If you use this—" Mana pointed to the wooden stick lying on top of the table. It was about a foot long and completely unadorned. "It won't be impossible to find the individuals we're after." Her phrasing was oddly roundabout. "It's a primitive magic. It indicates

direction but can't tell you precise locations. Our professional who used more advanced search methods…is gone. She was killed."

On the karaoke monitor, a pop group famous for having a lot of members was dancing. They were all arranged like Tetris blocks. Combined with the total silence of the muted TV, it was slightly creepy. The bright lights spilling from the screen lit Mana's face red. The soft hairs on her cheeks shone.

"That's all. If you have any questions, go ahead."

Ripple raised her hand, and Mana stared daggers at her. "What is it?" For someone who had invited questions, Mana seemed rather unwilling to answer.

Whether Ripple noticed that or not, she began to speak at a murmur. "You said there's been a death… So the fighting's already begun?"

"One of our members was killed in retreat. She abandoned the car and ran, but the enemy caught up to her and broke her neck with a single strike. That's all."

Her manner of speaking as she said "that's all" was simple, but her expression was not. Every inch of it was twisted in rage. Silently, 7753 averted her gaze. She was scared.

"…Could you give us any details about the enemy?" Ripple asked.

Mana snorted. "I've written up a memo on their general characteristics and made copies. Check that."

A pirate, a stage magician, an Arabian dancing girl, ribbons, a postal delivery girl, a wedding dress… The sheer number was more frightening to Kotori than their descriptions. Why were there so many?

"This document only lists what they look like…," said Ripple.

"That's all that we know, so that's all I've written down. I shouldn't have to explain that."

"But…"

"What if I told you it wasn't even a real fight? That we fled for our lives and one of our own was killed in the process? That we requested backup? …Happy now, you little shit?!"

7753 continued to look away, but even so, she knew exactly what kind of expression was on Mana's face. It felt like her fury was swallowing up this small room. Like chili pepper dissolved in water, it hurt to even touch it.

The only remaining sounds were Mana's breathing and the

karaoke commercials repeating over and over again. The interval between each breath gradually lengthened, and eventually, Mana punched the desk, drowning out the jingles. “Goddamn it. We really…have no time, and all of us gathered here are good at combat. Even if we’re not as good as *you*.”

But I’m not *good at it!* 7753 screamed internally.

“In this situation, we’ve got to fight. You may not like it, but you’re going to do the job.”

Mana and Ripple stared at each other for a little while. On Mana’s end, she was wearing more of a scowl, and on Ripple’s, she seemed to be sizing Mana up. Mana held Ripple’s gaze to the end, but Ripple slowly closed her eyes. “…Understood.”

Don’t give in, Ripple! Try harder! The cries of 7753’s heart reached no one and vanished. All the others were picking up their outerwear and coats and scarfs and getting ready to go. 7753 hid her reluctance, but she dawdled in putting on her coat. She’d bought it for when she was in human form. The classy charcoal gray was too drab for a magical girl, and it was too big.

She equipped her goggles, and then while she was buttoning up her coat, she heard someone whispering to her.

“…This has been a disaster, huh?” It was Ripple. Up close, the scar on her face looked raw and painful. 7753 had assumed that it was just part of her character design, but maybe it was actually a wound she’d received in real combat. “So will the training be after this is over…?”

Oh! thought 7753. Data popped up in her goggles. Name, height, and weight, and then it slid down to a new page, listing career and place of birth, family structure, then the next page, and a number of pages after that, it arrived at the *Today’s Plan* column.

Now she understood why Ripple’s name had sounded familiar when she’d first heard it. Originally, 7753 had come to this rural town to train a newbie. She’d arrived here along a series of special express trains after receiving an order to look into a certain magical girl’s aptitude for working an internal affairs job for the Magical Kingdom.

7753 put her hands together, apologizing for having forgotten, too. “I’m sorry, but we may not be able do that right away. Even once the arrest is done, we’ll have to deal with settling everything.”

“I wonder how long that will be…”

“I’m thinking the earlier, the better, but right now, I couldn’t

really say… But the city where I live isn't so far from here. Once things have calmed down, I'll come over right away."

Ripple raised her eyebrows doubtfully. She was probably just trying to look doubtful, but in her case, even that look had quite a lot of punch. "You don't live here…?"

"Huh? No, I don't. I mean, this is your region, isn't it, Ripple?"

"No…it's not."

"Huh?"

They looked at each other.

7753 had been called out to her trainees' districts before. This was done when she had to do things like watch them work in their home region, or check up on town rumors to see if they had been exposed or not. That was less like training and more like observation. Conversely, trainees would come out to visit 7753, too, which was more common. That was done when she was teaching the basics to young magical girls who had not yet been assigned a region.

Not once had she ever been summoned to an area that was not her trainee's responsibility. If there was some reason for this, it would certainly have been told to 7753.

As she tilted her head, wondering just what was going on here, she got a phone call. Her magical phone's caller ID indicated it was from her boss. Archfiend Pam, Hana, and Mana all left the room. Making an apologetic gesture with one hand, 7753 told Ripple to go on ahead and pressed the ACCEPT CALL button. "This is 7753."

"So it seems you've met the team."

Without thinking, she stared at her phone. Had her boss been watching from somewhere?

"I wasn't watching. Your goggles are sending me information."

"Oh yeah."

"When the goggles are removed, the signal terminates. So could you not leave them off again like you just did when you set them on the karaoke table?"

So she had been watching, after all. 7753 gave her magical phone an uncomfortable look.

"There's no need for such tact. Even if your magic does invade their privacy, that won't be a problem as long as the individual in question doesn't know."

"Okay…"

"And there is something else I'd like to inform you about."

Before 7753 even called out, Hana Gekokujou was looking at her. It seemed her bunny ears were keen to her surroundings, even under her hood.

7753 raised an arm and called out to Mana and Hana, who had left the karaoke parlor and were about to head to the parking lot. Hana gave Mana a light poke, and before long, Mana broke out into a grimace. She had been staring at 7753. 7753 didn't need to check the data in her goggles to recognize she was angry.

"What are you dragging your heels for?! What about the other two?!" This time, Hana made no attempt to pacify Mana, who was still eyeing 7753 suspiciously.

7753 raised her palms defensively. "Ripple is back at the front desk, distracting Archfiend Pam for you. I need to talk to you about something."

"I have nothing to talk about."

"I am not an assassin or a killer."

The creases in Mana's brow vanished. Her anger turned to surprise, and her mouth, slightly agape and about to retort, froze in place.

"The Magical Girl Resources Department purely wants to be allowed to cooperate in the investigation." Moving in so close to Mana that she could feel her breath, 7753 lowered her voice to almost a whisper. "My own abilities in combat are nothing more than average, since my job provided no opportunities to fight. But I have a discerning eye. And I don't just mean because I've been trained in magical-girl resources." She flicked her goggles with her fingertip. "This is my magic. Even when a magical girl is in human form, if I look at her through my goggles, it's clear to me at a glance what she is."

Mana grabbed 7753 by her coat collar. Her expression wasn't irritated, but it was hard to call it amicable. She wasn't angry; she was threatening 7753 to learn what she could. "Just—what—and—how much—do you—know—?"

"Your investigation team believes that Ripple and I are assassins sent in to finish off living witnesses, since we were dispatched from other departments. Am I wrong?"

Still clutching her collar, Mana fell silent. Her attitude was basically an affirmation.

"It appears a barrier has been erected around the town."

"What about it? It's to prevent the criminal's escape."

“An anti-magic barrier covering the whole of B City… A powerful blockade that prevents anyone with magical elements from getting in or out. Even in human form, a magical girl can’t go through it. The same goes for mascots.”

“Yeah, that’s right. We’ve been locked in. So what of it?” Mana apparently wanted to wait and see how 7753 would act. She licked her lips with the tip of her tongue.

The slight gesture made 7753 flinch, but she plunged ahead. “Their reaction was way too fast to have come only after being notified of your retreat. Putting up such a large-scale barrier requires careful preparation of both practitioners and catalysts. So, in other words, you figured this barrier may have been prepared in advance, didn’t you? Your specialized inspection team was driven off, and they even took into account your request for support. By forcibly creating the barrier they prepared in advance, the Department of Diplomacy has cut B City off from the outside.”

7753 paused, wiping the sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand.

“The barrier was erected under the initiative of the Department of Diplomacy. They locked us in with the criminals. That wasn’t done by Magical Girl Resources. Even we didn’t know about the barrier—unlike the Department of Diplomacy, which sent in a weapon of mass destruction and then erected a barrier to lock us all in.”

“No, you *are* the same.” Mana shoved her aside, releasing her collar and causing 7753 to stagger. “You may seem to be in conflict now, but you’re villains of the same stripe. You’re all trying to use this incident as a political tool. But that’s not how this is gonna go. I won’t let that happen. This murderer will be dealt with, as a murderer. I don’t care if they’re the dregs of society, pure evil, or just a maggot, that doesn’t mean it’s okay to make them your toy. One of mine died. Being forced into your games isn’t worth it,” she spat, her gaze sharp. She wasn’t so much glaring at 7753 as she was glaring through her.

7753 sucked in a breath, filling her blood with oxygen.

“I’ve looked into you guys,” Mana continued, “because I wanted to know what sort of people were butting in here and what their goals were…and I found out that Ripple over there was one of Cranberry’s children. What’s more, she’s a survivor of the final exam, where Cranberry died…the one they say was the most brutal.

What a laugh. Who would believe that?"

"Ripple's job is to guard me. That was why she came here. I won't make her do anything beyond that. Besides, though she made it through Cranberry's exam, she just barely survived. You can tell from her eye and arm, right? She's not as strong now as she was at her peak. The most she can do is protect one noncombatant magical girl."

7753 lowered the tone of her voice one more notch. "As you know, the magical girl the Department of Diplomacy sent us is Archfiend Pam. Nominally, she's here to support us, but she's capable of mass destruction. They call her the Department of Diplomacy's final weapon. That's clearly too much firepower just to help us with an arrest in this town. There's a good chance the Department of Diplomacy is trying to erase this criminal from existence." She bowed her head. "If we cooperate, we may be able to arrest our culprit before they let Archfiend Pam off the leash. Neither of us wants the Department of Diplomacy doing as they please, and on that count, our goals are the same. We want you to use us. We won't get in your way. Please make use of our abilities."

Head still bowed, 7753 went still. She could hear Mana and Hana discussing something in murmurs. She couldn't make out what they were saying, but she could take a guess. They were probably deciding whether to let her help or drive her away.

7753 heaved a deep sigh. She felt like her heart was ready to jump out of her mouth.

Every single bit of it had been done under her boss's instruction. She could claim she didn't know anything about any of this, but Mana was unlikely to believe her. But it was the truth. 7753 had been following her boss's orders in real time to negotiate with Mana. Her instructions, down to the words she should say, had been displayed at her boss's discretion. She had received detailed directions for every gesture, like *Drop the tone of your voice here* or *Move in until you're a foot away from her*. 7753 had desperately obeyed every one, heart pounding all the while.

These were 7753's goggles, but even she hadn't known they could do that. Had this function been added in? She didn't want to think about how else they'd been tampered with.

Digesting the conversation she'd just had, she couldn't stave off the feeling that something terrible was going on. She was getting closer and closer to the heart of this problem. At the very least, she

wanted to get out alive.

☆ Ripple (Time remaining: twenty-two hours, thirty-eight minutes)

A magical girl had to clear a number of conditions to climb the ladder within the Magical Kingdom's administration. One of those was to take a one-on-one induction course from a magical girl named 7753.

7753 had magical goggles that could accurately measure all forms of data, and she was good at using them to smoke out potential troublemakers. There were no secrets to be hidden from 7753's magic. Be it girlish crushes or wounds of the past, everything about you would be exposed to the light of day, and the information they extracted from you would be sent to the Magical Girl Resources Department. This prevented antiestablishment factions and discontent from getting into the Magical Kingdom's mechanisms.

It wasn't as if Ripple had any special love for the Magical Kingdom. If pressed, she would say she was closer to hating it. But she wasn't aiming to overthrow the system, either. She wanted to be successful within the existing structure.

Ripple had a friend, another magical girl. She was the proactive, self-confident type. Her assertiveness also meant she drew more attention from the higher-ups. For now, she was appointed to an important post because she was very capable. But who knew how long things would continue to go that way?

Ripple wanted to be her backup. And for that, she would need status and a position. That was why Ripple wanted to rise through the ranks. Through the tenuous connection of friend of a friend, she had learned the names of some magical girls with ties to the Magical Kingdom and sought them out. She had assisted them, chatted with them, annoyed them until they told her she could stop coming around anytime now, but even so, she'd continued to visit them until they were exasperated by the futility of their plight and by doing that over and over, she'd increased the number of acquaintances she could call connections.

Ripple had picked up this aggressive technique from her former partner. She had made friends in the worst way: forcibly prying

their hearts open so she could fit herself into them. Ripple had been one of her victims.

The way everyone else saw it, she might have turned into her old mentor.

Ripple's application for 7753's induction course had gone through smoothly. Since she'd heard people would be waiting at least a year, even with connections, she was relieved. Pleased at setting out on the road to success, she'd headed out to B City as directed when she'd received instructions via her magical phone that she should go to a karaoke bar for some reason. Upon arrival, she discovered that she'd been dragged into this arrest attempt and locked inside the city.

As usual, the Magical Kingdom's use of magical girls was careless. Even when they were aware of threats to the girls' lives, the Magical Kingdom had no issue with adding nonspecialists to the team. But for Ripple, it was also fair to call it her big chance. Having the Magical Kingdom witness her exploits by accident like this might actually end up being better than taking that induction course. Combat was her strong point anyway. Or, more accurately, she was specialized more in that direction.

But as the situation was explained to her, those thoughts evaporated. The only thing she felt at the orders to fight in an enclosed space was revulsion. The fact that their side would be avoiding killing was a relief, but she doubted their enemy would do the same. As long as arrest equaled their ruin, an assassination specialist was bound to make use of their area of expertise.

7753, whom she had met in the karaoke bar, seemed somehow restless and apologetic as the special investigative team chief, Mana, chewed her out over every little thing. If 7753 was the person she was rumored to be, then her specialty was Magical Girl Resources, and being dragged into this had to be even worse for her than it was for Ripple. Ripple should support her somehow; of course, she also calculated that doing so might improve her standing.

And that was what she was doing at the moment.

7753 had begged her to please do this, and now Ripple was face-to-face with one of the other helpers sent from another department, Archfiend Pam. They were sitting on the sofa at the front desk of the karaoke parlor. 7753 had asked Ripple to occupy

Archfiend Pam for a while, and Ripple had wondered what to do. She hadn't been able to come up with any reason to stop someone she'd only just met.

Left with no options, she spoke frankly. "Um…"

"What is it?"

"I've been told they want to have a secret discussion…and we should wait for a while…"

"Oh, I see. Well then, let's wait together until they call for us," Archfiend Pam agreed readily, without any particular sign of offense. She didn't seem to be a bad person, which made Ripple breathe a sigh of relief.

The two of them were wrapped up in their coats, and Archfiend Pam also wore a Panama hat to conceal her horns. They sat on the sofa, pretending to be humans. It was an odd hour for two girls to be hanging out, but nobody called them on it. The pair continued to wait in the lobby area and its vague odor of cigarettes, occasionally rejecting men who tried to chat them up.

Archfiend Pam was gentle and leisurely in both her manner and tone. It conjured up the image of an old lady in Ripple's mind. Not in the sense of advanced age, but her general aura and social distance reminded Ripple of her grandmother. Not that she'd ever met her real grandmother, but she fit what Ripple vaguely imagined her to be.

Archfiend Pam rested her elbows on her knees and supported her chin with her hands, blowing a sigh. "I apologize for asking such an abrupt question, but…"

"…Yes?"

"Have I perhaps met you somewhere before?"

Ripple dug through her memory. She recalled the faces of every magical girl she'd ever met and double-checked that Archfiend Pam was not among them. "…No. I believe this is the first."

"Oh, is that right? I just had this vague feeling we had."

Her grandmotherly impression of Pam now included senility. But even just thinking that made her feel bad. It was unacceptably rude, so she chided herself and dismantled that mental image.

Following that, they waited even more. The one to break the silence was, as before, Archfiend Pam. It was uncommon now as ever for Ripple to talk to someone first. "You don't have to act so formally with me."

"…Huh?"

“We’re both outsiders here. So neither of us is higher-ranking.”

“Well… You’ve been pretty polite to me, too.”

“I treat both superiors and coworkers the same way, regardless of their status.”

“I’m…the same way…”

“Is that so?”

“…Yes.” Ripple felt like there was something off about this conversation. But it wasn’t that uncomfortable. Maybe that was because the image of her grandmother was still lingering in her mind.

☆ **Toko (Time remaining: twenty-two hours, thirty minutes)**

A very regrettable incident has brought about a change in our plans, meow.

This wasn’t what they had discussed. Not at all.

Resigned to her anger, Toko railed away on the magical phone propped up against the fence on the roof. With the petite physique of a fairy, even typing a single message was a huge pain. She punched, kicked, and sent the message, then saw the reply and yelled out, “I *said*, this isn’t what we discussed!”

She had been told that if she got rid of the inspection team, they would guide her and her partner to their escape. They were supposed to introduce her to a magical girl who had a hideout in another dimension.

But the message she’d received from her ally said that the plan had changed. A barrier had been erected around them, and Archfiend Pam from the Department of Diplomacy had been tossed inside. The Department of Diplomacy was coming to crush them, with their reputation on the line. Her escape routes had been blocked off. Neither Toko nor her partner would be able to get out.

With a rage-filled front kick, Toko hit REPLY, typed her message in a fury, and sent it. A response came quickly.

The barrier is shaped just like a perfect sphere encompassing everything, meow.

So you can’t escape by flying through the air or digging underground, meow.

Just touch it, and you'll be as weak as a kitten, meow.

If you keep on touching it, your life will be in danger, even if you do have a magical girl's strength, meow.

I can't at all recommend trying to do anything to the barrier, meow.

Toko whacked her elbow against the screen.

Every day, she had wondered why every damn sentence had to end with a meow, and now that same question was boiling up within her. She clenched her jaw. There was still more to the message.

We haven't yet given up, meow.

You two are just that valuable to us, meow.

The grating flattery just made Toko even more irritated. She had been disposing of individuals who got in their way, as per their directions. Both Toko and her partner were in deep with this employee. If she and her partner were caught, this colleague would be the one in trouble. It was less that Toko and her partner were valuable and more that this was a problem that desperately needed a cover-up.

I want you to evade them somehow, until the barrier is taken down, meow.

The barrier will wear off within twenty-four hours, meow.

Shake them off until then, and we will send you backup, meow.

Good luck, meow.

Somehow, Toko managed to resist the urge to smash the magical phone to pieces. If she were to lose her cool, others would take advantage of it. She'd seen more than her fill of people like that—people who'd had everything stolen from them, from their money to their lives, in just the same manner. In fact, Toko had always been on the side that was actively taking advantage. Idiots were made to be used, and she couldn't afford to become one herself.

Toko turned off her magical phone and took some deep breaths.

She thought about her number-one priority: herself and her

partner. All else aside, their own survival and escape was the big goal.

How would she use these twenty-four hours to achieve that goal? Would they just run around from place to place? Or would they kill all their enemies?

It would be one of those two. The choice was up to Toko—and up to her partner. Toko aside, her partner was strong. That inspection team shouldn't be an issue. The problem wasn't them but the reinforcements. She'd heard that the Department of Diplomacy was coming to hit them with everything they had.

—Well, if you kill that many people, they're bound to resent you, eh?

Her partner was strong but not invincible. If the Department of Diplomacy was deploying an incredible magical girl, there was a possibility Toko's partner would lose. That was bad. Her partner had a future. Toko couldn't allow her to die now.

So then should they run? That was too cowardly.

She would test the scope of their opponents' power while placing those middle school kids on the front line, and if it looked as if they couldn't win, she would choose to flee. Making the kids their meat shields could probably buy them time to escape, at least. She'd always intended for them to be sacrificial pawns anyway, these instant magical girls she'd lured in. Dying was a part of the job, and she wouldn't let them complain about that. They would lay the foundations for Toko and her partner.

She would have liked to increase her forces and form a magical-girl army to solidify her advantage in numbers, but those with magical potential were not that common. She had summoned all the ones she'd found through her continuous search during her time watching over her partner at school. These were all the cards she had to play. So she had to make do with this hand.

From the floor below, she could hear middle school kids chatting pleasantly, her partner's voice among them. No matter how impatient she may be on the inside, the girl's acting was perfect. She was better at this than Toko, who let her real personality show even when she was trying to pretend to be an adorable fairy.

In any event, Toko couldn't let her go now. She still had room to grow. She was Toko's ideal magical girl—cunning, self-centered, skilled with the arithmetic of gains and losses. She always took steps to get the upper hand, had endless potential, and ultimately,

she would be the one sitting atop the throne of victory.

Toko would show them that, with her partner, she could evade them to the bitter end. She gave a greasy smile.

CHAPTER 3

THE GIRL WHO SWOOPED BACK FROM THE DEEPEST PRISON

Magical girls were in the business of selling dreams and fantasy. However, from time to time, some would dirty their hands with criminal acts. No matter how strict the selection exams were, there would always be a certain number of bad apples among the lot. And the more rotten they were, the stronger their influence would be. That's why they had to be removed, since what they say about spoiling the bunch didn't just apply to humans.

In fact, it might be even more serious with magical girls. On top of their regular human abilities, magical girls had a capacity to kill and injure far exceeding that of the largest predators—and potentially tanks, fighter aircraft, missiles, and weapons of mass destruction, depending on the individual. This made villainous magical girls far nastier than their human counterparts.

Humans could hardly perceive what magical girls did, and relationships between magical girls of equal rank tended to be weak—meaning few reports from other magical girls—so criminals generally went undetected. The Magical Kingdom's system of oversight was essentially a sieve. However, once they did come to light, their punishments would be severe.

If their violation was in bad faith, they would be shunted to a magical girl who specialized in corrections for reeducation. If their influence on human and magical-girl society was great enough, or their acts themselves had been extremely vicious and left them no hope for correction, then all their memories regarding magical girls would be erased, and they would be ejected into society as a regular human again.

Usually, that was as far as it went. It was rare for anyone to

receive a punishment greater than that. However, that didn't mean it never happened at all.

There were some individuals who would do harm if released out into society, even without their magical-girl powers. Others might have them restored by some related party who would make contact with them, even if the criminal was expelled into society with their memories erased.

Such criminals who would inspire continued concerns as to their futures were imprisoned and cut off from the world. Legal reform twenty-seven years earlier had changed the regulations, making it so that there was currently no death penalty in the Magical Kingdom, for human rights reasons. However, imprisonment was not so different from death, functionally speaking.

Imprisonment by the Magical Kingdom meant being sealed away by magic. These seals, applied by elite, first-class practitioners, made every single thing the subject did confusing and exhausting.

When sealed away, these serious criminals of the magical-girl world were guarded by multiple layers of barriers and strictly monitored. Their location was kept at the highest level of confidentiality, and all that was known generally was that it was somewhere in this world.

If you were going to put an emphasis on security, then the best choice would be to imprison them in a facility within the Magical Kingdom, since there would be no way for an escapee to get out of the realm. But the prison was in the human world. Some said that residents of the Magical Kingdom had rejected the idea of constructing a prison there, while others held to the official explanation that crimes committed in the human world should be punished in the human world. Yet others said it was just a convention with no particular meaning.

☆ Pythie Frederica

In the cracks within the space between reality and dream, existence itself becomes vague, melting in a winding, muddy path, on and on. You're incapable of any normal powers of thought, but your sense of time is oddly lucid, and as you try to escape from someone

chasing you, you keep struggling and flailing—even though you don't know where your pursuer is. You try to move your hands and feet to go somewhere, anywhere, even though you can't perceive your limbs. Impatience builds, but nothing else does.

I never want to go back, the magical girl Pythie Frederica thought most earnestly. Arching her back, she stretched. Some time must have passed. She bent her arms, then extended them again in a flexibility exercise. Her hair bounced on her back. She drank in the joy of moving her body of her own will.

It seemed the strength of her muscles, her endurance, and her spirit were still sharp. If she were ordered right here and now to enter a duel to the death, she'd be able to move her body to an extent.

She bent each of her fingers one by one and then opened them again. She lifted a leg up high, then bent from the knee. She jumped up almost high enough to hit the ceiling—which wasn't that high—and landed. Her long skirts followed her, floating and swelling. Dust wafted up within the small, moldy-smelling room.

"So how're you feeling?"

"Hmm, well…," replied Frederica.

As they chatted, they walked. Frederica took two steps toward the center of the room, closing in on her opponent, and launched a front kick. The attack wasn't telegraphed, but it was blocked gently with a hand. As she drew back her foot, her ankle-length skirt billowed up to become a floating blindfold as Frederica turned and stabbed out with a spear-hand. Her opponent avoided it with a half step back and then smoothly unsheathed a guitar from her back and ground out a riff. The eighth notes overflowed from the guitar like hail, but Frederica brushed them off with the turning hem of her skirt, letting the momentum carry her into a midair spin and landing in an erect stance.

The eighth notes hit the floor with hard *thunk*s, then melted away.

The two of them faced each other for a while, still in fighting stances, and then Frederica slowly relaxed her expression. "It seems I can move well enough to repay my debt to you."

"Yee-hee-hee-hee! You're the same as ever."

Frederica looked around the room. Seeing the whole thing, fifteen square feet in size, with floor, walls, and ceiling all of undressed concrete and iron bars over the small window, it looked

like a prison or some cheap flophouse in a slum. The only anomaly was the multicolored magical inscription in the center of the room.

Frederica went down on one knee to lean in close to the writing. It wasn't just a single circle; there were many of them, with several overlapping layers. By magically combining letters and symbols and drawing them out, they had made multiple magical inscriptions into one single one, focusing all their powers on one direction.

With the pad of her finger, she stroked the enchanted writing and scratched at it with her fingernail. It didn't seem as if anything special would happen. This magical formation had already lost its power.

"What wonderful technique. So this was the inscription that sealed me away?" asked Frederica.

"They're rotten as hell, but they're still the Magical Kingdom. We brought in an ace caster, but undoing that thing was still a big struggle."

Frederica stood up, bowed at her savior, and then used her pointer finger to swish her flowing black hair over her shoulder. "I'm grateful for your help."

"Oh no, no need to thank me. Saving her master is the least a student can do."

"But you weren't looking to save me for no reward, were you?"

"Well…"

Frederica turned back to face the magical girl Tot Pop, running her eyes over her boots, pants, and shirt. Her costume, with its liberal use of studs, belts, leather, and spikes, was less "magical girl" and more like a pop star's onstage ensemble. Her skull-based theme had a strong presence, and her hair decoration looked just like a bear trap. Her guitar, which at a glance looked like a barbaric ax, only reinforced the theme further.

Her face was also covered with a gas mask, but it was apparent from its contrasting design that this had not originally been part of her costume.

"It's been a long time since I last saw you. It seems you haven't changed; that's a relief."

"I should be the one saying that, Master Frederica." The girl slid her gas mask aside to show her face. She was smiling. Her lip piercing glinted. Being cute and beautiful was a characteristic common to all magical girls, so that wasn't anything worthy of

mention, but her large, unreserved grin was just the sort Frederica liked. The wisp of hair lying against her forehead was especially nice. Not only was it glossy and vibrant, her short hair seemed full of vitality in each and every strand. Frederica put her hand on Tot Pop's head, petting it as if to say, *"Good girl."* Tot Pop seemed pleased, like a cat looking for attention from her owner.

Once she was done indulging herself in the texture of Tot Pop's hair, Frederica pulled her right hand away and brought it to her nose, slowly inhaling the smell and then blowing out a long breath. "You're most *certainly* Tot Pop."

"And you're definitely Tot's master."

For many years, Pythie Frederica had trained magical girls. She'd had many students, but she remembered few of them. Tot Pop had been an excellent student, but excellence alone wasn't enough to make Frederica remember anyone. What was most deeply carved into her memory was Tot Pop's intense lifestyle as a warrior who devoted herself to antiestablishment organizations in the continuous fight to transform the Magical Kingdom. Also the smell of her hair, which would sweetly, gently tickle the membranes of Frederica's nose.

The one to capture and imprison Frederica had been her final student. That girl might no longer think of Frederica as her master. But even now, Frederica still considered her a darling student.

While avoiding the watchful eye of the Magical Kingdom, Frederica went slightly out of control in search of her as-yet undiscovered ideal magical girl. She'd done something similar to what the infamous Musician of the Forest, Cranberry, had done before, and an unfortunate disagreement with Snow White, Frederica's final pupil, had led Snow White to find out. Unable to forgive her, Snow White had brought the ax down, and Frederica had been arrested.

Most lamentable of all was that her collection of magical-girl hair, gathered steadily over the course of many years, had been confiscated by the authorities. But that aside, Frederica hadn't thought it so bad to be captured, then; since her final student was so excellent, she had thought, *I don't suppose I'll have regrets, if I can leave the rest to her.* She'd found Snow White's actions commendable. Afterward, she was investigated and imprisoned, and now another pupil of hers had gotten her out again. For better or for worse, her fate was in the hands of her students.

Tot Pop shifted gently over sideways, put her hand on the doorknob, and turned it halfway. “All right, we’re getting out of here before they come after us. I’ll tell you the whole story on the way out.” She creaked open the door, a single layer of rough metal. In the narrow hallway beyond, they could hear the pitter-patter of footsteps as girls in gas masks dashed from room to room.

“You guys ready?” Tot Pop yelled out.

“Hold on just a sec!” One of the girls stopped to yell back, then ran off again. As the girl ran off, the hem of her skirt fluttered animatedly over her white calves as she leaped, and a lock of reddish-brown hair escaped from her gas mask to dance in the wind. Frederica’s cheeks relaxed into a smile. She no longer felt her arrest by Snow White was a praiseworthy accomplishment. After the experience of imprisonment inside that barrier, nobody would ever think about wanting to return. This was true for Frederica, too. And besides, now that she was going back to the outside world, it would be overflowing with wonderful hair and thrills to be had. It was easy enough to act like she was past the ordeal, but difficult to actually overcome it.

“Wait just a bit longer. We’ve gotta get outta here fast, but, well, there’s a lot of prep to do. I dunno if it’s magical stuff or what, though.” Tot Pop clapped her palms together and bowed her head, a very Japanese gesture. She wasn’t Japanese, but living somewhere for a while will change your habits.

Watching the girls in gas masks running around busily, Frederica touched her finger to the end of her chin. “You said you went to great difficulty to break through the barrier, right?”

“Yeah.”

“It must have taken tremendous effort to penetrate the defenses here, too.”

“No, no, that was like…”

No other smile defined “smirk” as well as hers, Frederica thought.

“I just sent a bunch of people out everywhere,” Tot Pop continued, “and used the information we gained to pick the best time, right when the prison guard was weakest, and we stormed the place.”

“…I see.”

Frederica had been rescued from imprisonment by a magical-girl squad led by Tot Pop, who was affiliated with antiestablishment

factions. So basically, those factions wanted to make use of Frederica's powers. Even if Tot Pop might try breaking her out just to fulfill her duty to her teacher, no organization would give her backup without demanding anything in return.

"What am I expected to do?" Frederica asked.

"It's kinda like searching for someone, or…yeah, kidnapping. A certain department of the Magical Kingdom keeps an assassin. You're gonna capture her and make a big scene of indicting her."

"I'm impressed you got ahold of that sort of information."

"I just told you, didn't I? Team Tot sent a bunch of people out everywhere."

Closing her eyes, Frederica imagined a track stretched in front of her. The rails were laid out by the antiestablishment organization, as they wanted her to do something for them. She couldn't see where they led. And she was being asked to follow them.

But they hadn't indicated the vehicle they wanted her to ride in.

"This was the seventh inn, wasn't it?" Frederica asked.

"Yep."

Such secret locations were called by unique code words to ensure that even if others heard, they wouldn't understand. The name "inn" was a secret term for prison.

Frederica traced back through her memory.

She had a fair number of strengths she could rely on: strength, speed, combat experience, her own magic. Before she'd been imprisoned, she'd had connections, too. She also possessed knowledge of magic and of magical girls.

In her endless love for magical girls, Frederica had used her own magic to gather information, many, many times. She'd also done more research than most would about magical-girl prisons. The criminals held within them had very much stimulated her curiosity.

There was no prison for magical girls in Japan. If a villainous magical girl were apprehended within its borders, there would be nowhere to put them, so they would be sent to another country. The seventh inn was supposedly in England. Frederica was not the only magical girl to be imprisoned there. Long before her arrest, other magical girls who had done their evil deeds in this country had been locked up in this prison. And if she recalled correctly, they

were—

"The caster who undid my seal is still here, right?"

"Yup. What about it?"

"I'd like to have her undo two more seals."

"…What? Uh…huh? No, no, no." Tot Pop waved her hand vigorously in front of her face. "I'm telling you, we've got no time. No way, no way, no way. If we drag our asses, some scary types will show up."

"That won't be a problem."

"It'd be a huge problem! We were told to do this fast!"

"If my thinking is correct, we shouldn't be too pressed for time."

"Wait, but—"

"Please instruct them as such." Frederica could see the rails. And that was exactly why she needed a strong train. She couldn't be alone. She needed a stronger, more villainous, crazier magical girl. Her casual spar with Tot Pop earlier had shown her that Tot Pop had grown plenty, but even then, that wasn't enough actors for the stage. She wanted a monster who would make even Frederica her toy.

And such a monster would be found here.

"First, undo the seal on Pukin. After that, undo the seal on Sonia Bean." Those two would be enough. They would be useful, no matter what the mission was. They might help *too* much and go on a rampage, but that energy was perfect. Frederica liked the kind of magical girls that even she couldn't control.

Frederica smiled. She was grateful from the bottom of her heart that she was able to return. She could be together with her beloved magical girls once more. Nothing could please her more. "Come on, hurry up. Our seniors are impatient. If you're late to wake them, they'll scold you for it."

Grumbling, Tot Pop gave the orders, and the girls in gas masks began working to undo the next barrier.

Frederica hugged Tot Pop close and buried her face in her hair.

Pythie Frederica was particularly fond of magical girls. If she heard of an excellent up-and-comer in the east, she would rush out there to pick up some of her hair, and if she heard of a beauty in the west, she would set out to pilfer her hair, too. In pursuit of her ideal, she had discovered talent among the budding magical girls,

and as an examiner, she had raised them up. And she was not only interested in those of the present day. She had also pored over the past, looking through the exploits of famous pioneers.

And the renowned were not only those who had received praise. Infamy is another type of fame, as they say, and the worse they were, the more documentation on them remained. The magical girls who had made those records back then must have prioritized chronicling evil deeds over the activities of their peers. Had that been out of jealousy, or had they believed that using these examples as lessons to the next generation was their first priority?

Both passion and necessity fueled Frederica's desire to know how these bad eggs had fallen to the path of evil. The ideal magical girl Frederica sought was a righteous one. And a truly righteous magical girl always required the presence of evil.

Pukin and Sonia Bean were particularly infamous, even among those who had made names for themselves through evil deeds. Their rampage had been over a hundred and thirty years ago, on the British Isles. Their exploits were so notorious, they were immortalized in nursery rhymes passed down in local tunes, with cruel lyrics such as, *The streets run red when Sonia walks* and *Pukin reclines on the mountain of dead*.

The details of those who died to satisfy Pukin's hobby of cruel torture, the numbers of victims to Sonia's sudden robberies, the number of people Pukin had falsely accused, the political purges Sonia had enacted against those who had opposed her—all these misdeeds had been recorded.

In regions where they'd been particularly active, their names were used to warn children: *"If you're bad, Pukin and Sonia will get you."* It was said these threats would make children sob with fear and apologize to their parents. This might be the only way the two of them had ever helped other people, since the day they'd been born.

Pythie Frederica was familiar not only with the public side of their affairs, but Pukin's and Sonia Bean's criminal histories, tendencies, and what about their characters could be inferred from those things.

The first seal undone was Pukin's.

The gas mask squad members all scattered to their designated positions. One prayed in order to weaken the magic, while another strengthened the unlocking magic from the side. Yet another sucked

up magical power to hand to another, and one more sent her will into the magical inscription to attack it from within. A single nail was pounded into the inscription and turned into a sapling with roots that plunged down to break up the concrete. Cracks radiated from the nail. The inscription's shape swelled and distorted; the magical energy, powerful enough to be visible, stained the surrounding atmosphere like industrial oil spilling into water as the shrill sound of something breaking struck Frederica's ears. She ordered the gas mask squad and Tot Pop to get back.

The continuously changing hues mixed together to blend into gray, while at the same time, the laws of physics regained control of the space, and things settled into how they should be. Frederica felt drunk just from watching. Recalling that she herself had also been freed in the same way, she felt a little nauseous.

The wafting gray hues dissipated into smoke, beyond which a silhouette appeared.

She was clad in what looked like a fairy-tale prince's costume: a waterfowl feather stuck in her brightly colored hair, long gloves and matching boots, a wavy ruff, and a rapier hanging from her waist. If you didn't know what she really was, she'd look just like a hero of justice. She appeared dazed, and the light in her eyes was vaguely blurred as she glanced restlessly all around. But even with a rather unimpressive expression and manner, she looked as beautiful as any magical girl… No, in Frederica's eyes, she shone even brighter.

“Whoa…” Tot Pop gasped reflexively. And it wasn’t just her. The gas mask girls behind them were murmuring, too.

As those who defied the system and dealt in the illegal, they would have noticed. They could see the gushing blood that flowed around Pukin like a river, and they could hear the resentful cries and curses from those who had died under her boots. All she had to do was stand there, and you could feel through your skin just how many people she had killed.

Frederica spread her arms to hold back the magical girls behind her. They couldn’t approach Pukin yet. She checked everything with great care, from the rapier at Pukin’s waist, the length of her limbs, to her muscularity as a magical girl, and maintained what she felt should be a safe distance.

Pukin tottered unsteadily, but bit by bit, the light returned to her eyes. Frederica knelt at Pukin’s feet and bowed her head low. “My name is Frederica, General Pukin. We’ve come to receive you.” When she lifted her head, Pukin was looking at her in surprise. Frederica gave a little smile, and seeing that, Pukin replied with a smirk from just the corners of her lips. It was an unpleasant way to smile, but it still didn’t dissolve the impression of nobility.

“Is this work?” Pukin’s voice was the same. Though it should have sounded like the beautiful voice of a human girl, the stench of blood clung to it. She was just talking to them, but it came out like a threat.

“We will offer you a reward.”

“Oh? So you don’t want free labor?”

“There’s no need for you to return to this prison ever again. I offer you freedom,” Frederica proposed.

Pukin glanced back at Frederica for a while, surprised, and then gave an amused grin. “How interesting! You mean to release the monster who has been sealed away for all eternity?”

“Locking up one such as Your Excellency forever would be blasphemous to human history.” Most people would never take to such flattery, but Frederica knew that Pukin was not most people. Placating Pukin would make her easier to handle.

The swordswoman Pukin nodded arrogantly as if to say, *“Of course.”* “I don’t give a damn what manner of challenges you have for me, though I wouldn’t mind kissing this wretched place good-

bye. On my honor, I will repay you for releasing me. By the way, where's Sonia?"

"I've ordered these girls to rescue her the moment we receive Your Excellency's permission."

"You need none. Get her out of there immediately. Sonia is a loyal retainer to us. Not only does she serve wholeheartedly, she has a certain talent. Sonia is necessary."

There was some chatter behind Frederica, along with a mutter of, "The royal we? Seriously?" followed by a quiet giggle. Above Frederica's head, something silver sparkled.

"Now then, let's go to Sonia. I'm sure she's waiting with bated breath—the girl's a crybaby and so needy. Leave her by herself for one moment, and she'll be on the verge of tears." Pukin began to walk off, treating Frederica's underlings as if they were invisible, which forced the gas mask squad to hurriedly clear a path. Frederica headed to the front to lead Pukin.

Pukin nodded twice in satisfaction. "I'll leave you to clean up these rude ones." While walking, Pukin snapped the fingers of her right hand, and instantly there was a *thunk, thunk* as two somethings fell to the ground. Screams followed. When Frederica looked back, two gas masks—no, two severed heads—were lying in the hallway. The walls, the floor, the magical girls—everything was splattered red with fresh blood.

Two of the magical girls had been decapitated. Their bodies collapsed on their knees, blood gushing and spurting from their necks. They were probably the two who had scoffed at Pukin's personal pronoun and giggled.

Tot Pop froze at the sudden act of violence, but Frederica held her in check with a look. She then quietly ordered Tot Pop to make sure things were cleaned up, then turned and resumed walking.

Many things had to be taken into consideration if they were going to be working together with Pukin. Frederica had explained clearly to the gas mask girls that they were absolutely not to be rude, but nevertheless, some would fail to manage that. Girls, by nature, can't be silenced.

Sonia Bean contrasted with Pukin in every single way. Unlike Pukin, so confident and bold, she appeared timid and nervous. She would twitch and glance around at even the slightest noise. It was so bad, just watching her stirred up sympathy.

Perhaps it was her outfit that made her seem so pitiful. Unlike Pukin's elegant and aristocratic garb, Sonia's costume was in tatters, a threadbare patchwork of sewn-up rips and tears. Fortunately, there was nothing indecent about it. If pressed to say, she looked comical, like a cartoon character.

Not only did the two of them differ completely in appearance, but also in their backgrounds. Pukin had racked up achievement after brilliant achievement as a Magical Kingdom official, while rumor had it Sonia had hidden in a cave and attacked passing travelers. If Pukin hadn't taken her in specially, she would have most likely spent her whole life as a mugger.

Now, the two of them were in the basement lounge of a pub, eating whole roasted chicken. With fine skill and proper manners, Pukin was using her knife and fork to cut up the meat and eat it. Sonia was grabbing and chomping into a leg of chicken like a wild animal. If it had been served raw, she might just have wolfed it down anyway.

This was a special room that sold itself on profligate, luxurious furnishings such as silver candlesticks from the days of the court of York, Persian tapestries woven of pure silk, and amethyst chandeliers. Tot Pop had boasted that the Mafia, politicians, and nouveau riche would visit this place surreptitiously. They had rented this room to show respect to the newly awakened pair, but the two didn't so much as glance at the furnishings, engrossed in their meal.

With a brief "Pardon me," Frederica stood from her seat. Sonia and Pukin ignored her, continuing their meal.

Frederica left the room quietly. A low bass sound resonated deep in her body from the music booming down from the floor above. It wasn't to her taste, and she didn't even know the genre, but it was the kind that Tot Pop would probably like. As she walked through the door into a hallway covered from floor to ceiling in resplendent tile, she found Tot Pop standing imposingly there. Her ostensible role here was to guard them, more or less.

"Hello, Tot Pop."

"Hey, master. So those two actually eat, huh?"

"Yes, they're different in many ways from modern magical girls, due to steady progress in selective breeding. We're superior with regards to fuel consumption, at least… But that aside." Frederica narrowed her eyes suspiciously. "Why are you speaking so quietly?"

“I mean…” Tot Pop leaned in and lowered her voice further. Her breath stroked Frederica’s cheek, and the sensation made Frederica tremble reflexively in joy. “I don’t wanna say something dumb and then, *shlick*!”

“That’s quite the suggestive sound effect you’re using.”

“This isn’t a joke. They’re dangerous. It’s scary.”

“But you like those kinds of people, don’t you?”

“Of course!” Tot Pop beamed and gave a thumbs-up before returning her expression back to normal. “But y’know, Tot’s basically a leader now, so…” This time, she pointed her thumb at herself and puffed out her chest. She smiled proudly, then pulled herself together again. “I don’t want my cute little girls to end up dead.”

“That’s a reasonable explanation.”

“I mean, I love carrying a bomb around, but as a kingpin, I’ve gotta take the safety of my minions into consideration, first.”

“About that. I’ve been thinking perhaps it might be a good idea to operate with just the four of us: you, me, General Pukin, and Lady Sonia.”

“Pardon?”

“A small party of elites. Our task will be easier if we keep our numbers low.”

Tot Pop leaned against the tile wall and glanced at the door at the end of the hallway. “Can we trust those two that much?”

“Speaking purely as to their skills, they’re without question worthy of our trust. As for their character…neither of us has room to criticize anyway.”

“If we lose control and it all blows up in the end, that’s not gonna get us anywhere, is it?”

“Controlling Sonia is General Pukin’s job. Ensuring General Pukin enjoys so graciously working for us is mine.”

One hundred and thirty years ago, when Pukin had been in power, she had worked as an inspector for the Magical Kingdom. It was a management position, the opposite of her current status. It was said that she’d been a talented inspector who others had dubbed “General” for her prosecution of many magical-girl criminals.

It hadn’t taken long for her glowing reputation to reverse course and hit rock bottom. The true culprit of a robbery incident Pukin had resolved was unable to stand her guilt and confessed to a

friend, who recommended she should turn herself in—so she did. This led to the incident being reexamined, and it was made clear that the allegations had been false, but the accused had already been executed.

One by one, cases that Pukin had handled were reopened, beginning with the less convincing ones. The result of the investigation was that Pukin had used her magic to force false confessions out of people, shifting the blame no matter what the crime was.

Under the laws of the Magical Kingdom at the time, the inspectors had possessed unusually powerful rights. All the assets of the executed would be confiscated, and half would go to the inspector. Pukin was apprehended for making false accusations for financial gain and sentenced to imprisonment.

Immediately before Pukin's arrest, she had published a book. This autobiography, which both bragged of her own exploits and also attempted to justify them, still remained within the Magical Kingdom's document vaults. This heinous book, bulging with excuses for her crimes and misdirected pride in her abilities, was bound to make anyone snicker. Frederica doubted it was based on reality, but it did vividly communicate the humanity of the author.

Frederica was good at currying favor with people. She would find the things others enjoyed, work her way into their hearts, and gently massage them. If that thing was part of an easily understood stereotype, then all the more so. She could control Pukin in any number of ways.

Pukin's book was fundamentally all about herself, but there were also accounts of Sonia, albeit few and far between. Sonia had been sort of like Pukin's bodyguard. As was obvious after her stunt in the prison, Pukin was no poor hand at violence. The one special fighter she had entrusted with violent tasks was a girl named Sonia Bean. With Sonia's absolute viciousness backing her, Pukin had thrown her weight around, growing worse and worse with time, celebrating the heights of prosperity until the Magical Kingdom had arrested her.

"I know it's neither here nor there to say this now that we've already gone and released them, but I'm thinking maybe they're a little too much firepower for this next job," said Tot Pop.

"You're saying their strength is unnecessary?"

"The job is to catch one assassin hiding in a town. The only

problem is there's a mage on the inspection team, so there's a barrier around the whole town, and you can't get in from the outside using normal means."

Frederica gave a faint smile and petted Tot Pop's head.

The reform faction was intending to capture this criminal and safeguard them as proof of the Magical Kingdom's illegality…or that was the plan. Tot Pop believed so, at least.

Frederica did not. Though the Magical Kingdom did underestimate magical girls, it didn't indulge them. Frederica had a long history of using her magic to collect all the information she could, so she was aware of the collusion between the upper ranks of the reform faction and the Magical Kingdom. They might want to act like revolutionaries, but in truth, they had deep ties with certain powers in the Magical Kingdom, and they did no more than act as a branch office, shouldering a part of the power struggle. Such revolutionaries were allowed to exist in the Magical Kingdom out of convenience.

The Magical Kingdom would not have allowed such a painless assault on a prison, helpless as they released dangerous inmates. Frederica was forced to assume that the ones controlling Tot Pop had pulled some strings to open holes in security, setting the stage for her. That was exactly why Frederica had released Pukin and Sonia. She'd judged that even if they took a long time, the guards were not going to come. The Magical Girl Division of the Magical Kingdom was an overcompartmentalized bureaucracy. Each department sabotaged the others as they all competed ruthlessly to protect their own vested interests. The rumors that the assassin was working for some department were probably true. That was exactly why Frederica could surmise that the various powers would all jump in together in an attempt to either capture the criminal or kill one another.

Right now, it was more than just the special inspection team and the culprit in B City; a number of very powerful magical girls who had received orders from various departments had surely infiltrated the area. If they were going to jump into that situation, they needed the appropriate firepower. Simply strolling in empty-handed would only get them routed, and that would be the end of things. The result would be the same no matter how many pigs they sent out there. What they needed most of all was an ace. Pukin and Sonia would prevent them from being driven out. They would

become their unbreakable backbone.

And that backbone would be useful, even after this job was over. This was a delicate affair they were dealing with. Tot Pop was Frederica's favorite student, but in this situation, Frederica couldn't trust her or her backing 100 percent. She needed some insurance that she would be safely released once she'd fulfilled her most important role. Masters who tossed their hunting dog into the pot together with the bunny it had caught were the rule rather than the exception. If Frederica wanted freedom, she needed enough power to avoid being silenced.

"Consider your priorities. You needn't worry so unnecessarily."

"Unnecessarily? Am I?"

"Yes, you are." Frederica stuck up her pointer finger, gently touched it to her lips, and glanced at the door of the special room. Tot Pop's gaze followed hers at the gesture. She started as the door began to slowly open at that very moment.

"Pukin says not enough food…," Sonia mumbled, poking her head out. Her gaze was pointed down at her feet, but the statement was probably directed at Frederica and Tot Pop. After Frederica's prompting, Tot Pop energetically rushed off and returned in less than three minutes. She had big plates in each hand, another pair of plates balanced on each arm, and even a bowl on top of her head.

When Frederica switched places with her in the hallway, she pushed Tot Pop's back. "What is it you should do right now?"

"Bring in the food?"

"Yes, bring in the food, and one more thing: Ensure our guests have a good time."

"Ensure they have a good time?"

"Use your clever conversation skills to show them some fun, get closer to them, and become friends, please. That's sure to make this task easier."

"Huh? Wait, master, clearly, this is—"

Frederica knocked on the door, gently opened it to toss in Tot Pop, then closed it shut.

Tot Pop had her job to do, and Frederica had hers. She thought about the assassin being targeted by this gang of various powers.

A magical girl who specialized in assassination. Her weapon was a large blade. Frederica had recommended to her last apprentice, Snow White, that she use a large weapon, but…

—That girl wouldn't assassinate anyone.

Frederica's amassed collection of magical-girl hair had been confiscated by the authorities. If she'd still had that, she could have gone to meet Snow White. Though having to start from square one with her collection pained Frederica, the thought of gathering it all over again gave her a thrill, too.

Pythie Frederica's magic was difficult to describe in just a few words.

The first thing she needed was some hair from her target's head, a length long enough to wrap around her finger. It had to be hair from a person's head, and you couldn't swap in some other body hair. She would wrap her target's hair around her finger and tie it tight, which would show her target's reflection in the crystal ball she'd hold in her left hand.

No matter where her target was—wandering in outer space ten billion light-years away, locked in cyberspace, off on a grand adventure in another dimension, starting a new life in a parallel world—Frederica's crystal ball would display whatever it was they were doing at that given moment. However, that was only if they were alive; she couldn't display a dead person.

When Frederica was in active service, she had used this magic as much as she wanted. She'd polished the technique of stealthily plucking out a hair as she crossed paths with someone. If that didn't work, she would sneak into their home and crawl on their carpet in search of fallen hairs. She'd use the strands to figure out her coworker's weaknesses, learn of her superiors' love affairs, eavesdrop on private conversations, and make fun of cute girls and their lifestyles. Her magic was hers to use as she pleased.

And that's not all; Frederica's magic was for more than just remote viewing.

By plunging her own hand into the crystal ball, she could manipulate the scene reflected within. Her disembodied hand was able to move, grab, pinch, squeeze, punch, and slap her target just as her physical hand might.

She could also grab objects and bring them back to her when she retracted her hand. The objects she withdrew were not restricted to the size of the crystal ball; anything Frederica could lift in one hand, she could drag out, big or small. The laws of physics did not apply to her magic; they ignored distance, dimension, space, and location.

She could do the opposite, too. If she held something in her hand and plunged it into the crystal ball, she could deliver that something directly to the target in the display.

The task the reform faction wanted Frederica to do involved putting this ability to use. By sending in people through her crystal ball, they could ignore the twenty-four-hour barrier and then come back. Since she and the others were free to go in and out, the barrier was actually helpful to them. As long as it was up, their target couldn't escape. It was just like grabbing a little caged bird in your hand. Their mission was to secure the criminal within the twenty-four-hour time limit.

Pukin and Sonia would deal with the venomous snakes that targeted the little bird appropriately. If the inspection team got in the way, they would deal with them, too. How many could surpass these two when it came to sheer force?

Thirty minutes had elapsed since Frederica had tossed Tot Pop into the room.

Frederica was good at getting close to people. By observing them with her magic, she would determine what sort of language, mannerisms, and personal background they preferred in a person and then adapt accordingly. It didn't matter what it took—special treatment, deference, flattery, collaboration, guidance, sympathy, the occasional strategic hostility—she would do everything in her power to curry favor.

Frederica's student Tot Pop was good at getting close to people, too. But her methodology was inimitable for her mentor. Though Tot Pop was Frederica's student, her way was innate to her and not something Frederica had taught her.

Tot Pop was sloppy, laid-back, easygoing, and didn't fuss over anything. She was fine with whatever, as long as it was fun, and she took this lifestyle to a new level most would normally never consider. You could be her parents' or closest friends' worst enemy, but as long as you were fun to be around, she was totally fine with things. No matter if you were a terrorist, a murderer-rapist, hair fetishist, stalker, magical-girl fanatic, or examiner who had made her examinees fight one another to the death, if you were someone she liked, she'd just be like, *"Rockin'!"* And that was that.

And on that count, she wasn't deceptive in the way that Frederica was. She would feel genuine, deep affection and

friendship for that person, making them want to respond in kind. To Tot Pop, stubborn people were like hedgehogs; she would neither avoid nor remove their spines, but instead let things lie, and if she got stabbed, it wouldn't bother her.

Frederica had been fully aware of these special qualities when she had assigned Tot Pop to Sonia and Pukin.

"To begin with, they said we had fabricated their sins. And it's true, we did. I'll admit it. But those acts were all for the sake of justice."

"What d'you mean?"

"From many years of experience as a torturer, we could find ways to discern a person's disposition and know whether they will bring evil to the world or good."

"Whoa! Dude!"

"Even if they hadn't committed any sins just yet, if they were going to turn evil later on, then it was our duty as a watchman of the law to pluck them right then and there. We did nothing more than fulfill that obligation. But the inquiry's report made it up to seem like we were massacring innocent civilians out of sheer self-interest."

"For real?! That's crazy!"

"And that's what remained for the rest of history. Our name has gone down as one of an incomparable agent of atrocity…"

"That's harsh! Those inquiry guys sucked!"

"If the only victim of such slander had been us alone, then we could've managed. But even now, I regret that Sonia was dragged into this mess."

"Whoa, you're a really good person, General. People are totally gonna love you! With a boss like you, they'll put their lives on the line to follow you."

Tot Pop may have already forgotten that not long ago, she had been lamenting her own underlings' murders. She was listening attentively to Pukin's endless stream of complaints. Frederica pulled her ear away from the door and stood up. *Quite impressive, if I may say so about my own student.*

"If we're all traveling overseas, then we wish to take a plane."

Since there was no time, Frederica refused Pukin's suggestion politely to prevent Pukin from losing face. She had already retrieved some B City resident's hair from an accomplice. Without

this one strand of hair, they would have been unable to ignore the barrier and enter B City.

Wrapping the strand around her finger, first, Frederica pushed Tot Pop into the crystal ball, then deposited Sonia and Pukin in succession, and finally, in an act that ignored the laws of physics, she grabbed herself with her own hand and plunged herself into the crystal ball. With that, the Revolutionary Army Special Forces Unit (so named by Pukin) cleared the magic-repelling barrier and infiltrated B City.

Once Frederica entered, the owner of the hair was already half-dead.

"We told him we would kill him if he fled, but he attempted to run nevertheless."

"I get the sense you probably should've told him that in Japanese."

"An unfortunate misunderstanding."

Lying facedown on a table in a puddle of his own blood with his throat sliced up, the portly old gentleman died before long. It seemed Pukin had more or less listened to Frederica's instruction not to kill the hair's owner, or she wouldn't be able to use her magic. Either Pukin or Sonia would have killed him more swiftly if they hadn't been holding back.

They had made it into the barrier without incident. From this point forward, they would have to pound the pavement to search for their target. But then Pukin whined, "You're not going to make us *walk* around the city, are you?" And so they ended up looking for a car that would do. It was certainly a decent enough mode of transportation. In a small town like this, as long as you avoided rush hour, you would rarely get into a traffic jam, and best of all, even with all four of them together, they could get around without drawing attention to themselves.

The problem was whether they could find a car that would satisfy Pukin. It was already nighttime, and since this was an empty small-town street, Frederica anticipated it would take them quite a while to acquire a car. But contrary to her expectations, they quickly found something suitable—or rather, it found them. Pukin ordered Sonia to chase after it. Sonia ran alongside the car and opened the door from the outside. No sooner had she reached inside than the driver was already decapitated, and the vehicle spun out of control before crashing to a stop into a telephone pole.

Pukin was furious with Sonia for destroying the car they had been after. As Sonia trembled with tears rising in her eyes, Tot Pop swooped in to help, probably feeling sorry for her. “The bumper’s just a bit dented. We can use this, no problem. American cars tend to be sturdier than the domestic stuff.”

The vintage Plymouth Fury was polished to a sparkle, just like brand-new, but the front showed some signs of their earlier accident. It was a vivid red color. The driver seemed to be wearing a department-store suit that didn’t fit quite right, though perhaps that was because he no longer had a head and neck. He must have been a young white-collar worker with a new job. Why he had been driving a car like this one would forever remain a mystery.

“We have seen this car before, in a movie. We’ve wanted to take a ride in one ever since.”

“The one with that car that kills people?”

“Yes, yes, that’s the one!”

Pukin had been imprisoned one hundred and thirty years ago, so how did she know about movies that had been made after that? The answer was because she had been temporarily released from prison a number of times for “work.”

“I hate to break it to you, but this here’s a different model.”

“That’s unfortunate. But we can compromise.”

“It’s based on a book, y’know.”

“Oh, we’d like to read that. Is there an English or Latin translation?”

Tot Pop sat shotgun, Pukin in the rear, and Frederica took the driver’s seat. Sonia quickly undressed the body with practiced ease, gathering up the man’s bag to toss it into the trunk with everything else.

Seeing that, Pukin yelled at her. “Sonia! How many times do we have to tell you?! You can’t just bring anything and everything with you! Get rid of the man’s possessions along with the body!”

“B-but…’e’s got nice cwothes…”

“You won’t starve even if you don’t sell the clothes. This country is full of good food to eat. We’ll give you some sushi or tempura or whatever you like, so please, exercise some self-control right now.”

Sonia eyed the body from top to bottom, looking sad to see it go. She gently patted it all over and turned the body into shriveled black remains. The black waste crumbled apart, unable to hold its

shape, even though there was no wind. In the end, nothing was left.

This was Sonia Bean's magic. She could deteriorate anything she touched. No living thing, inanimate object, or even energy, was immune. This magic had enabled Pukin's arrogant and despotic actions and been the indirect cause that led to her subjugation by the Magical Kingdom.

Sonia seemed stricken as she got into the back seat. Pukin comforted her, telling her there would be sukiyaki, too, while Tot Pop exclaimed brightly, "What a hungry soul!" Frederica couldn't tell what there was for her to be so happy about. Perhaps Frederica was the one among this group of four with the most common sense, and such a thought gave her a quiet sense of glee. Frederica loved magical girls who lacked common sense. Were all her students still doing well?

B City was somewhat large, and the barrier covered the majority of it. It was best to keep away from the city's edge as they drove. They couldn't afford to touch the barrier, even if they just took a wrong turn. If they were to hit the barrier in a car, only the car would exit, and the magical girls inside would be stuck. It wasn't hard to imagine just how horrible that would be.

Frederica drove down the farm-encircled highway for about fifteen minutes. Meanwhile, Pukin continued chatting idly as Sonia fiddled with the dead salaryman's smartphone. Frederica found a conveyor-belt sushi chain by the roadside and stopped the car.

"Huh? You're gonna eat more? Didn't you guys just have a big meal?"

"There's always room for sushi! Let's go, Sonia!"

"Comiiin'!"

Pukin gracefully passed through the hanging curtains at the entrance of the sushi restaurant, while Sonia anxiously followed after her.

Frederica smiled calmly. "Let's accompany them."

"Aw man, we've got a job to do! But I guess there's no helping it… Save some tuna for Tot, 'kay?"

The older-model magical girls were gas-guzzlers compared to the newer ones. They needed refueling. Besides, what Pukin had said earlier to stop Sonia had been an implicit demand for sushi, tempura, and sukiyaki. It was best to meet what demands they could and reduce her stress.

“Oh-ho, so this is sushi! Incredible! It’s riding a conveyor belt! I had heard this country was a manufacturing giant, but to apply that industry even to sushi…the Japanese people are a force to be reckoned with. Calm down, Sonia, the sushi won’t run away… Oh, it *is* running away. All right, let’s tuck in.”

Sonia devoured the sushi with enough force to halt the conveyor belt, and when she made a mess, Pukin would casually wipe it up for her as she secured her own portion. Tot Pop just cheered her on. Their looks were enough to make them stand out, but their mannerisms attracted still more attention. The staff and the few customers present were staring and whispering.

Some of them came to ask permission to take photographs, and Frederica allowed it. “Go ahead, go ahead.” She faced their raised smartphones and smiled.

Back in the day when Frederica had worked as a magical girl, she had always kept her identity hidden and had been careful to avoid civilian eyes when she was on the clock, as per the Magical Kingdom’s rules. But now, they were just outlaws. They could do as they pleased while transformed. If doing so would hinder them in some way, that would be another story, but there was no need for unnecessary fuss about secrecy. Sonia turned to a middle-aged man pointing his smartphone at them and made a peace sign, her face still full of sushi, while Tot Pop scribbled off an autograph onto a piece of colored paper offered by the staff.

Frederica steeped a bag of green tea in hot water and blew on it twice before she took a sip. The Japanese tea at conveyor-belt sushi was cheap but familiar on the tongue. It calmed her heart. The teacup decorated with the names of different kinds of fish stirred a deep nostalgia for her homeland now that she had returned.

During their long term of imprisonment, the Magical Kingdom had sent Pukin and Sonia out many times to do their dirty work. The reason they had gone to the trouble of sealing away these dangerous magical girls was, in fact, because they would later be useful to the Magical Kingdom.

Mages had at their disposal an innumerable number of magics through the use of spells, tools, sacrifices, and rituals. So many variations existed that you could describe their magic as all-purpose. However, there were many prerequisites and conditions for its use, and to strengthen it, you needed either time or a catalyst, meaning there was a lot of cost involved anyway. On the

other hand, magical girls each only had one type of magic they could use, but in most cases, it was incredibly powerful, could be activated instantly, and could be used indefinitely. They were equipped with far more robust bodies and greater athletic abilities compared to mages. This was why the Magical Kingdom made use of magical girls.

Frederica dug through her memories, poring over all the countless secrets of the strangers she had peeped on with her magic.

When temporarily undoing the seals upon Pukin and Sonia, the authorities would always take caution upon caution, forcing them to work in a state that would completely rob them of any method of resistance. They would not simply have them guarded. They would take double and triple safety measures, such as equipping them with headsets with bombs implanted in them, or brainwashing them with magic, or taking one of them hostage, or injecting them with a magical poison fatal to even a magical girl without an injection of the antidote within a certain time limit, and so on and so forth.

Pukin must have been constantly resentful about this. Frederica had experienced herself the unceasing struggle of being sealed away, stuck in a quagmire without knowing up or down. Though theirs may have been a retributive sentence, it would have continued for eternity. They were shackled and worked like slaves, and once their tasks were done, they were returned to prison. They had to be unhappy about that.

Right now, Pukin was doing as she pleased without a single restraint. Frederica had no way of knowing when she might bring about a global crisis. Some had already died, in fact.

The Magical Kingdom had asked itself if it should let these two free with no safety measures and had come up with the answer: absolutely not. Frederica was certain that right now, she was doing something the Magical Kingdom had never expected. She was an individual operating completely outside of their calculations.

She sipped another mouthful of green tea from her cup. This light, cheap flavor could become a habit.

“Hey, Frederica.”

“What is it, General Pukin?”

“The plates stopped coming.”

“You can order directly from the chefs. I’ll translate for you.”

“You’re so very talented! Once this mission is over, I’ll appoint you to a position directly under my command.”

Frederica had received some hair from Tot Pop. She'd also acquired some from Pukin and Sonia earlier, as well as a number of strands from Tot Pop's subordinates and regular people passing by.

Hair was essential for Frederica's magic. Having more in hand would increase her options. Her powers would increase in breadth and scope and make Frederica herself stronger.

That was her excuse, at least. The truth was that she just wanted to collect hair. Even if it couldn't be as good as her lost collection, she wanted to inch even a little closer to what she'd had. And for that, she needed true, inviolable freedom. So first, she had to make this job a success.

Frederica unfolded a slip of paper, pulled a single strand of hair out from it, and held it up to the sushi shop lights. She'd received this one from one of Tot Pop's subordinates, a girl with the most beautiful hair. The strand itself was not even a foot long, but it shone a brilliant gold that reminded her of richly ripened ears of rice in fall. Its splendor made Frederica smile, and she took another sip of her tea.

CHAPTER 4
A HERO? OR AN IDOL?

☆ 7753 (Time remaining: twenty-two hours, twelve minutes)

Ripple's duffle coat had a hood. But since it wasn't long enough to cover her feet, she couldn't hide her one-toothed geta.

7753's peacoat lacked a hood. She had no hat, either, and no surgical mask. When she expressed her wish to buy a hat, Mana told her, "We don't have the time," and that was that. So she just bought a surgical mask at the convenience store and borrowed Ripple's scarf to wrap around her head. She kept her goggles on, too, so she must have looked like quite a suspicious individual.

Hana had even managed to tuck away her long ears into her hood. She must have taken the length of her ears into account when she got that coat. It was a long coat, too, and fully covered her rather bare legs.

Mana wore a trench coat, and it didn't have a hood, either. But she wore neither a mask nor a hat, leaving everything above the neck open. 7753 wondered if that was okay, but Mana was basically a pro, so it had to be fine.

Archfiend Pam's dress coat made 7753 feel uncomfortable in a way she couldn't quite put into words. It looked like off-the-rack clothing bought from a store but also like a haute couture item, or perhaps even handmade. Maybe it wasn't a coat she'd put on after transformation but rather part of her costume.

Now basically all of them were in coats and pretending to be normal people. But 7753 wasn't sure how regular humans would see them.

7753 was less than an amateur when it came to investigations like this one. She might have talked big and muscled her way in,

but she had just been reciting word for word a speech her boss had made up for her. She may have doubts, but she was absolutely not going to voice them.

Mana got into a small cream-white sedan and fiddled with her magical phone. Apparently, they were using this car for the investigation. 7753 breathed a sigh of relief, glad that they wouldn't have to walk around dressed like this. But the car wasn't very magical girl–ish.

Generally, a magical girl could run way faster than she could drive a car. However, they couldn't afford to stand out in broad daylight.

The tinted plastic on the windows wasn't very sedan-like. It felt like an undercover police car.

"We were using a station wagon that was a little bigger. But we abandoned it when the enemy attacked us." Hana seemed apologetic as she opened up the driver's side door and showed them the cramped interior of the car.

Mana snorted at her. "Just remembering that is aggravating. Don't talk about it." Then, despite having just ordered Hana not to talk about it, Mana told them about what had happened after they were attacked.

Two magical girls had chased after the station wagon when Mana and her partner had tried to drive away. Figuring their pursuers would catch up to them, Mana had used her magic to put up a smoke screen so the two of them could escape. They'd burst out of either side of the station wagon, running in opposite directions in an attempt to shake off pursuit. Mana had somehow managed to escape, but when she'd met up with Hana to search for their team member, they'd found her body with its neck broken, hidden in a back alley, covered by a cardboard box. There had been no sign that she'd resisted. Mana said it looked as if she had been kicked in the neck from behind while she'd been running.

"Fucking hell. They killed the search specialist Section Three entrusted to us just like that." Her voice was thick with regret as she basically admitted they'd had the wool pulled over their eyes. One of their team had been killed, and since the Department of Diplomacy had put up a barrier without even consulting anyone, now they were locked in. But Mana still wasn't giving up. "We'll look for Toko. Or if not her, then a magical girl. We just have to be the first to act. The barrier won't last forever. Casters, tools, and the

regional magic all have their limits. Once the effects wear off, they won't be able to raise a new one right away. It's twenty-four hours until the time limit on the barrier is up…well, twenty-two hours now, huh? If the enemy escapes us even after all that time…"

Deep furrows appeared in her forehead as her eyebrows rose and nostrils flared. Every single part of her face twisted in anger. 7753 felt as if she could hear Mana's molars grating. She looked away.

Mana breathed a deep sigh and continued. "…Further failure is not on the table. And if we've got outsiders butting in here, too, that goes double."

After that, Mana fell silent, and Hana followed up very apologetically. "Um, so 7753 and Ripple, I want to confirm something, first of all."

"Yes?"

"Do both of your magics use your eyes? Am I right to assume your always-accurate shuriken can only hit things you can see, Ripple? And that you can only see the status screens of people in your field of vision, 7753?"

"No, I can't use it on people I can't see," 7753 said, and she glanced at Ripple, who gave a little nod.

"Got it. So that means it's best if you two can see… Then I suppose this should do it."

All of a sudden, 7753's field of vision cleared. Unable to grasp right away what had changed, she was confused. She tried taking off her goggles, thinking that the transparency had increased, but that wasn't it. She could see everything clearly: the scenery around her and the distant background. A magical girl had better vision than a human did, but this was beyond that. When she looked at Ripple, she saw that the ninja was glancing all around, just like she was.

"This is my magic." Hana Gekokujou's magic was to make senses sharper. She could heighten any of them: sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch. "I can do all of them at once, too, but too much would make you confused. Also, when I use my magic on multiple people, the more I do, the harder it gets. So for now, sight only. How is it? Shall I raise it a bit more?"

Everything seemed to come closer, like an optical illusion, and then 7753 could clearly perceive each and every speck of dust in the air. The shape of the clouds drifting across the sky were

perfectly distinct to her. She could even identify the types of trees growing on mountains that had merely registered as distant background moments before.

"Something like this? Raising your sensitivity any higher might start to give you problems, though."

"Wow, this is awesome. You're amazing!"

"Oh, no, it's nothing great."

Transforming from human to magical girl made all your senses sharper, but the joy of this change was different, less a deep stirring of emotion and more a feeling of discovery.

Ripple crouched on the spot, and when she stood again, there were two little stones in her right hand. She threw one of them into the sky, and in a flash it was gone. The other little stone followed it, after a hard windup and a powerful fling. Before long, they could hear the crack of the two stones colliding high in the sky. Fragments fluttered down, and Hana and 7753 cried out in surprise, applauding.

"That's quite the skill," said Hana.

"…Not at all."

"This magic is only effective within a ten-foot radius of me. If you stay as close to me as possible, it won't wear off or anything."

Hana drove the car. Sharpening her senses, she took on the role of enemy scanner, making sure to pick up on anything unusual. When she was asked if the police would stop her since she looked underage, Hana showed off her license. It said she was twenty-one years old, and the ID photo looked just like her—but without bunny ears.

"Our team chief is good at making things like these." Apparently, Mana had forged it. Most modern technology was reproducible with magic.

"Now all that's left is to go over the procedures and divvy up roles."

Mana used her magic staff to search for the general area their targets were located. The end of her staff apparently would point toward nearby magical presences, but it wandered around oddly, so it actually only gave them a general direction. Still, that was much better than nothing.

From the passenger seat, 7753 looked outside. The staff pointed toward their targets, but it wouldn't tell them how far away they were. That meant she had to use the goggles and heightened

eyesight to help with the search. Their enemies could be hiding inside a building, but that was still no reason not to look.

She needed to tweak the parameters that would be visible to her. She couldn't just say she couldn't find them because they weren't transformed. 7753 set a dreadful parameter that she normally wouldn't see as highest priority: "number of magical girls killed." Every time she saw someone from the window while they were driving, she focused her goggles' sights on them.

Ripple's role was to be her guard. Her magic was shuriken that would always hit their targets, and from what 7753 heard, she seemed pretty strong. She had been shocked to hear that Ripple had been one of Cranberry's children, but the magical girls sent to 7753 were all, to some extent, troublemakers. And they possessed the strength of problem children.

Hana didn't brag about her combat skills, but she couldn't be weak, either—after all, she and Mana had initially been central to this investigation. And the fact was, even though her magic was auxiliary, its effects were startling. However, there was that ten-foot constraint. They had to be careful about that.

And then there was one more in the group. 7753 looked out the window. She could see no moon or stars in the sky. Everything was covered by clouds. Since it was nighttime in November, it was chilly outside. Archfiend Pam was flying alone under the cold sky. She could fly at high speeds and had eyesight sharp enough to discern the world below from her high altitude, as well as the power to strike back if she were ever attacked from the air and the speed to race to them if anything went wrong on their end. Did that mean she could basically do anything?

The instant before Archfiend Pam had flown off, 7753's boss had bullied…er, instructed her to "take a look at Archfiend Pam's combat abilities." Timidly, 7753 had asked this of Archfiend Pam, and Pam had readily agreed. But when 7753 had attempted to check her combat abilities with her goggles, her vision was instantly overwhelmed by infinite heart symbols, burning her eyes with intense light and giving her a temporary headache.

When Archfiend Pam asked leisurely, "So whatcha think?" it was the most 7753 could to do to reply, "Amazing…"

Now, Archfiend Pam was flying so high that 7753 couldn't see her even with the help of Hana's magic. Perhaps this was because Mana didn't want to see Pam, or perhaps it was easier to look down

from higher in the sky; 7753 didn't know which. It could have been either.

Figuring their formation had to be totally airtight, 7753 started to gain a little confidence. She really didn't feel like she could help out in combat if the time came to fight, but division of labor was key. Even if she couldn't fight herself, it wasn't as if she would be completely useless. Thinking to herself that she would just do the best work she could, she looked out the window. Her status screen reeled by at a dizzying rate as she scanned those who entered her field of vision one after another. But with the dynamic vision of a magical girl, she could manage it without issue.

The car drove along the road at just about five miles per hour below the speed limit. Since there weren't a lot of cars going by on the two lanes, they weren't causing any traffic jams. They hit a T intersection and then turned left toward a brown field that had already been harvested. From there they turned left again onto a mountain road, passing by a reservoir and then starting on a winding descent.

7753 didn't really know where they were going or what the route was. "So…where are we trying to go?"

She didn't mean anything by that, but the immediate "Wha—?" from the rear seat clearly sounded grumpy, so 7753 closed her mouth.

From the driver's seat, Hana intervened. "I think it may be best for you to think of it as us driving in accordance with the staff's directions. It's not set in stone, so we have to change directions frequently, and there isn't much sense that we're aiming for a goal."

"Oh, I see."

"It's a fairly primitive method, but in the current situation, I think it may be the best we have."

"Has your concentration run dry already?" The voice from the back seat sounded even grumpier now, and 7753 ducked her head.

She felt bad, thinking she'd made life harder for Ripple beside Mana in the back seat. Being right next to a superior in a bad mood put a lot of pressure on you.

"Isn't concentration supposed to be one of the selling points of a magical girl? What are we gonna do if you guys can't even manage that? Huh?"

Agh, she's finally picking a fight. 7753 heaved a long-suffering sigh to herself.

“Oh, look, there’s a convenience store!” Hana pointed ahead. They could see it at the foot of the mountain. As was always the case with rural areas, the parking lot was needlessly large. “Shall I buy some dinner? It’s about time, isn’t it?”

“No, it’s fine. I’ll go myself. I’ll be back soon, so just wait there.”

Hana parked in the lot, and after a reminder to stay alert at all times, Mana left the car. 7753 blew a deep sigh. She was finally able to breathe.

“I’m sorry.” Hana put her hands together and bowed her head, a strained smile on her face. “She’s not a bad person. It’s easy to get the wrong idea about her, though.”

Figuring that she was referring to Mana, 7753 shook her head, flustered. “Um, no, I don’t really…” Maybe she’d been acting too blatant about it. Hana must have found the convenience store to make things easier for her. She had made Hana worry about her.

“She’s passionate about her work. She’s diligent and has a one-track mind, and sometimes she feels like she can do what she wants so long as she’s in the right. All the interference in this case has upset her… Er, sorry for calling you an interference.”

“Oh, it’s okay. You don’t have to be so delicate with me.” 7753 thought that “interference” was the perfect word for what her boss was doing.

“You can see who she really is when she gets drunk, but normally, she’s so hard to approach. But well, once her real personality is out, she’s easier to be around—like, she can be cute, though.” She seemed to be talking less about a boss and more about a little sister. From the way her bunny ears moved under her hood and the slight sourness in her smile, she seemed rather gleeful to 7753. “But normally, she’s got a bit of a sharp tongue…so I’m sorry, 7753, Ripple.”

“Oh, it’s nothing. It’s okay, really.”

“Really. She’s not a bad person. She’s more concerned about magical girls than anyone else out there.”

“She’s concerned about…magical girls?”

“Yep.”

The unease that had been with 7753 all this time was melting. Now that she thought about it, magical girls didn’t need dinner. It made sense that Mana didn’t look or dress like a magical girl. And when she’d talked about magical girls as a whole, she’d spoken as if

she was not included. “Mana isn’t a magical girl, is she?”

“No, she’s not. She’s what they call a mage… Wait, you didn’t realize?” Hana replied, shocked.

7753 was embarrassed. If she’d been paying proper attention, she would have noticed herself without being told. That day had been a string of unexpected events since morning, so maybe she hadn’t been thinking straight. Or so went her mental excuse. “I’m sorry; I’m embarrassed to say…”

“But with your magic, 7753, you can tell by looking, can’t you?”

“Well, um. I sort of take care to avoid using it as much as possible when I don’t need it. I mean, it would be rude to just go and scan people who aren’t my trainees, and I like to try to get permission as much as possible and stuff when I look, so… I’m sorry.”

Hana’s expression went from surprise to exasperation and then to happiness. Finally, she smiled. “You’re a good person, aren’t you, 7753?”

“Oh no, I’m really not.” She only did this because she didn’t want people getting mad at her. She knew better than anyone that she was just a coward. If anyone here was good, it would be Hana. She was the far better person for always trying to help her out. “Also, the way you say my name is a little strange.”

“Strange?”

“I mean, saying ‘seventy-seven-five-three’ in full every time is so long. Nana is fine. I’d prefer you just call me that.”

“But that’s like I’m calling you by a nickname.”

“I don’t mind if you use a nickname.”

“No, but—”

“No, no.”

“No, no, I mean—”

Hearing a giggle from the back seat, the two of them glanced behind them. Looking at her lap, Ripple muttered, “Pardon me.” Her cheeks were just a bit red.

☆ Kuru-Kuru Hime (Time remaining: twenty hours, five minutes)

It was near eight in the evening. After parting ways with the

students, Nozomi had made her way to the apartment building with the address she'd been given. In room 204, where everyone was supposed to have gathered, only Toko was present. She was sitting daintily on the table with a coaster under her.

"Where is everyone?"

"Hopping and prancing about outside. Humans who have just gotten powers can't help but want to try them out. Just moving around gets them so giddy." A cynical smile appeared on the face of the cute-looking fairy. "They're all young, so there's no helping that. Most of the kids who become magical girls are dim-witted. It's unusual for an adult to become one, though." She looked at Nozomi with upturned eyes. "You're a rare find."

"Me?"

"It means that your heart was ready to accept magical-girl-hood."

"I was never really aware of that myself."

"Life isn't just about the things you're aware of," Toko said, then fell silent and stared out the window. Nozomi got the feeling that Toko had just been disparaging her. *Playing with a bunch of kids? At your age?* She may just have been venting, but Nozomi felt that to be true of herself. Toko's expression revealed more maturity than any of them, Nozomi included.

"Hey, Toko."

"What?"

"What are the bad things these evil mages do, specifically?"

"It doesn't matter, does it? Check out some fairy tales or young adult novels or comics or anything. They're basically doing that," she said without even looking around. That perfunctory and indifferent way of dealing with people was also adult. Nozomi put her things on top of the sofa and left the room.

It seemed Toko's mood had improved while Nozomi was gone, over at the school. Or maybe it was less that her mood had improved, and rather that she'd simply calmed with the passage of time.

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After they'd driven away the enemy to end their first battle, all the novice magical girls returned to the science prep room, avoiding the

eyes of the public as they went.

Toko was still furious that they'd failed to kill anyone, but the students didn't flinch at her rage, instead discussing what they should do about their current predicament. Seeing the magical girls ignore what she had to say merely stoked the fire of Toko's anger, and after some yelling and raging, she flew off. After a while, they could hear what sounded like more angry yelling courtesy of Toko coming from the roof. Her harsh voice was filled with unmistakable aggravation. She came off less like a fairy than a gangster.

Soon after that, Toko came back, and though she wasn't exactly mad at that point, she was in an incredibly bad mood.

Toko said that an ally had contacted her, and she relayed to them what she had heard. A spherical barrier had been erected around the whole of the B City region for the next twenty-four hours. Evil mages could pull off that sort of thing easily. And now, this limited what they could do.

"You should've just killed them all quick." Toko wasn't even trying to hide her displeasure.

Nozomi was somber, but Captain Grace seemed full of confidence as she said, "We'll beat the enemy next time, so that doesn't matter, right?"

Weddin added pleasantly, "Let's settle down and make a proper plan."

Rain Pow kept things positive. "So in other words, this means for the next twenty-four hours, they can't escape, either."

Even Postarie was talking proactively. "If we use my magic, we can run after them."

Nozomi—the magical girl Kuru-Kuru Hime—patted Funny Trick's shoulder, comforting her. She was the only one of them discouraged by this. Having common sense did not always help you.

The whole group, including Toko, discussed their next step.

"It's getting dark, so it'd be best for us all to gather in one place, right?"

"You can practice your magic or chat, but put up a watch. Absolutely do not forget that the enemy is looking for us."

"If the enemy attacks you, just make some noise. Like, yell or something."

"Should we stay transformed?"

"That'd be best, considering the enemy might attack."

"Oh, that's true. But if we stay transformed, that might make it

easier for the enemy to find us."

"So then it's best to be detransformed, huh?"

"I can't just be the only one who stays transformed?"

"Umi, don't be selfish!"

Captain Grace ended up being the one to supply the magical-girl squad with a base. It was an old apartment building on the edge of town, currently unoccupied. Apparently, she'd inherited it from her grandfather.

Everyone headed over there, and the first thing they did was figure out their own magic and powers, then exchange information. If they were going to do anything, this had to come before anything else. They also made sure to call their families. Nozomi would temporarily split up with the others to go deal with some remaining work at the school and then meet up with them again. That was the plan.

After leaving the students, Nozomi recalled the events of a few years ago, when her mother's health had suddenly declined.

At the time, Nozomi had quit her job to take care of her mother. Her father didn't want a stranger caring for her, and Nozomi had been unable to say no to him. So either her father or Nozomi would have quit their job. When comparing their incomes, her father made more at the city hall. On top of that, when it came to house chores, it was better for Nozomi to handle them rather than make her father learn everything from square one.

She didn't regret the decision, exactly. She just wondered sometimes, *What if my mother hadn't gotten sick?* And she hated herself for thinking about it. She'd been seeing someone at the time and even thought it was about time she got married. But once her mother fell ill, she'd gotten fewer and fewer chances to see him, and eventually, he had broken up with her.

Her father was still well, but he talked less than he used to. If his health were to decline, Nozomi would have to care for him by herself this time. She couldn't just send her father to an institution when she had cared for her mother at home. She felt the same debt of gratitude to him for raising her as she did toward her mother.

Now that she had become a magical girl, it was just like when her mother had become ill. Her time was limited, and since now she had to deal with her personal business within that period, she couldn't manage her job anymore. With caring for her mother, she had discussed it with her father and cooperated with him.

Obviously, she couldn't ask for her father's help with magical-girl things. Even if this "danger to the world" Toko spoke of was looming, Nozomi had to return to the school alone for a curriculum meeting.

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When Nozomi arrived at the roof of the apartment building, she found all the students together there, testing out their magic and sharing opinions with one another. It seemed things were going reasonably well. Nozomi had already gotten used to the bizarre sight of all these pretty girls in strange outfits in a group and decided to join them. They opened up a space for her, and when she sat down, she suddenly noticed something. "Didn't we say we were going to undo our transformations?"

All of them were sitting there, transformed.

"Oh, well, there were reasons for that."

"Reasons? Like what?"

"One of us has a handicap when she's not transformed."

"Handicap?"

"Mei does," the dancing girl replied with her hand raised, then disappeared.

"Here, Ms. Himeno. Look." Captain Grace tugged her sleeve, and when Nozomi looked down, there was something there, where Tepsekemei had been. No, not something, but someone.

"Hmm?" Nozomi had seen this creature before. She seemed to recall it was the tortoise they kept in the science prep room… Before she even had the time to think about it, the tortoise vanished, and Tepsekemei reappeared.

"Tepsekemei can't talk in her other form, and she said it hinders her cognitive abilities, too… So Umi said, why doesn't everyone just stay transformed?" Funny Trick seemed to be desperately trying to keep up with the situation herself as she explained.

Nozomi pressed a finger between her eyes and massaged two, three times. Now that she was aware that magic surpassing the laws of physics and common sense was real, she wasn't going to get anywhere if she allowed herself to be startled by something like this. But it was careless of her not to notice that there were more

girls when they were transformed. In any case, now Tepsekemei was a full-fledged ally. Nozomi would feel bad if she hurt her with an exaggerated show of surprise.

"Um… Well then, let's move on, shall we? How far have you gotten with this discussion?"

"We were just talking about each of our magics," said Weddin.

"I see. So then could you tell me about them, too?"

"I made up a simple list. Please, feel free to take a look."

- Weddin (Mine Musubiya, class 2-D): Can force people to keep promises. Not very athletic.
- Captain Grace (Umi Shibahara, class 2-C): Summons a pirate ship. Can bring tools out from inside the ship. Excellent strength and speed.
- Tepsekemei (Egyptian tortoise Mei): Can merge with the air. Isn't very strong but is quite fast. Can fly.
- Funny Trick (Kayo Nemura, class 2-C): Can switch the positions of two hidden things. Fairly athletic.
- Postarie (Tatsuko Sakaki, class 1-B): Can make any object sprout wings to send it flying back to its owner. Not very athletic.
- Rain Pow (Kaori Ninotsugi, class 1-B): Can manifest rainbow bridges. Athletic ability is middling.
- Kuru-Kuru Hime (Nozomi Himeno, Japanese teacher): ?

This sort of thing must have been why she was the class representative. Teachers had an easier time of things with such a reliable student around. Nozomi transformed into Kuru-Kuru Hime to fill in the empty space on the list with her own magic.

Kuru-Kuru Hime's ability to manipulate ribbons could be useful when jumping between buildings, if she could time it right to help her with the movement. She would jump and then extend a ribbon from midair. Then she would grab on to the edge of a building or a chain-link roof fence with her ribbon and pull. Doing this, she could lengthen her jump, which could save her time. She could also use the ribbons to restrain enemies. She demonstrated this by undoing the ribbons decorating her whole body and wrapping them around and around Mine Musubiya, now transformed into the magical girl

Weddin. Weddin strained and strained her arms, but she could only wiggle. Magical girls were a lot stronger than humans, but Kuru-Kuru Hime's ribbons were sturdy enough to withstand it.

"I see. I can't move like this," said Weddin calmly. "You could use a skill like this in some dirty video game or manga."

"How does a minor like you know about that stuff?!"

"It's common knowledge."

“That is *not* common knowledge.”

Nozomi had thought that Mine was more straitlaced. She was speaking politely enough, but she was acting very chummy now. Perhaps she felt more familiar now as a fellow magical girl. Nozomi’s sense of dignity as a teacher had crumbled and disappeared. Though it was doubtful she’d ever had any in the first place.

Weddin’s magic was to compel people to keep their promises. No matter how casual it was, if you made any kind of promise to her, then you would have to keep it. If you said, “I’m not going to hit you,” and then raised your hand to try to slap her cheek, your arm would go numb, and you’d be unable to move it.

“That’s some scary magic…,” said Nozomi.

“It epitomizes the fearsome nature of marriage.”

“How can you say something like that when you’re underage?”

“It’s common knowledge.”

“It’s the kind of common knowledge you need to get rid of.”

While they were chattering away, Captain Grace, sitting on the edge of the roof, suddenly brought up something. “Now that we’re magical girls, don’t you guys feel like our names should have a theme or something? When you’ve got a unifying idea like fruits, or colors, or fire/water/earth/wind or something, you feel like a team, right?”

Weddin, Captain Grace, Funny Trick, Postarie, Tepsekemei. They were far from thematically consistent. Their names and outfits were all over the place, as if each one of them was a character from a different story. Kuru-Kuru Hime in particular stuck out like a sore thumb for being the only one whose name was in Japanese, which made sense, given she was a Japanese teacher.

It felt like her name didn’t quite match how cute she looked, festooned with ribbons. If Nozomi had chosen a name for herself, she would have gone with something fancier, though she would have kept in mind how the students saw her.

When she asked Toko, “Why did I end up with a name like this?” Toko puffed up her chest proudly and replied, “Inspiration struck!” Before the palm-sized fairy’s confident smile, Nozomi didn’t feel like pressing her any further about it. When she asked, “Can I at least change it?” Toko’s response was anything but dreamy: “You

need connections with higher-ups for that."

Weddin shrugged as her lips formed a cynical smirk. "I think it may be fine not to have any sense of cohesion. We're a ragtag team of odds and ends. That's undeniable."

Without missing a beat, Rain Pow countered, "That's not true! We're all allies from the same school."

"No. It's not as if we're real friends with trust or anything." Weddin gave a light nod. "Either way, we don't need a theme."

"But, like, don't magical girls have to have that sort of thing?"

Kuru-Kuru Hime didn't see anything wrong with Captain Grace's argument. In the long-running TV anime *Star Queen*, the girls were all named after constellations, and each of them used a special move based on their namesake. With the *Cutie Healer* series, each new series starred new magical girls, and their motif changed for each series, too. Kuru-Kuru Hime understood the desire to have all the names unified on a theme in a group of magical girls.

Weddin touched her middle finger between her eyes, then removed it again, wearing a look on her face that said, *"Whoops."* She'd probably forgotten she wasn't wearing glasses and had tried to adjust them. "Are we even magical girls in the first place?"

"What? Of course we are. That's what Toko said."

"I think it would be more accurate to say that we aren't."

They were girls living in modern Japan—well, aside from the one adult and one animal—but they had acquired mysterious powers, cute outfits, and pretty faces by means of a fairy who had come to them from the Magical Kingdom. What's more, the fairy herself was using the term "magical girls." There was no reason not to call them that.

Funny Trick put her finger on the end of her chin. "For better or for worse…I think we are."

"Toko has explained these things herself," said Weddin, "and I've personally done various experiments, as well. As expected, our physical capabilities have improved remarkably. I wouldn't say this is characteristic of a magical girl, but rather of a beautiful fighting girl or battle girl."

Kuru-Kuru Hime tilted her head and went, "*Hmm?* Aren't we the beautiful fighting-girl type of magical girls?"

"That's something else, isn't it?"

"But we were bestowed with magical powers."

"In this case, the source of our powers has nothing to do with it.

Some works still fit within the genre of magical girl even when their powers are ninjutsu or science-based."

"But Star Queen and Cutie Healer are both magical girls, right?"

"No. Star Queen and Cutie Healer are both beautiful fighting girls, not magical girls."

Weddin informed them that originally speaking, the magical-girl character type focused mainly on using magic in everyday life, and that they should clearly be distinguished from beautiful fighting girls. With the latter, both their enemies and allies had magic, or at least some power that was close to it. "The only reason the term 'magical girl' has come to include a separate genre as well is because their fans are so arrogant."

Clenching her fists so hard her fingers turned red as she passionately explained, she looked completely different from the girl Nozomi normally saw: the coolheaded class representative Mine Musubiya. The flame of the candle decorating Weddin's veil blazed higher. Was that candle linked to her mental state?

"When the majority of the show's cast comprises named characters involved in combat, rules like *You can't reveal your true identity* and *Magic is a secret* might as well not exist. Does the protagonist's magic-school classmate count as a magical girl? Does the elf girl who left the forest to become an adventurer because she wanted to see the human world count as a magical girl? No, they do not. They are not magical girls. They are neither beautiful fighting girls nor magical girls."

"Um… But, like, even in a fantasy story where magic is commonplace, there are characters with a magical-girl motif, right?" Funny Trick tried to argue back, even as Weddin pressed her.

But Weddin brushed her argument aside. "You would just call that a character with a magical-girl motif. If you take a real person…let's say Nobunaga Oda. A character based on him is never going to be the real Nobunaga Oda."

Captain Grace pouted. She did not seem to be happy. Kuru-Kuru Hime could easily see this getting annoying if she didn't step in, so she attempted to support Grace's side. "But there are works that have 'magical girl' in the title, right?"

"No, Ms. Himeno. That's just having magical girls as a motif. That doesn't make it a magical-girl story." With a cough, Weddin continued. "Plus, though you mentioned thematic names such as

those in *Cutie Healer* and *Star Queen*, the trope of themed names is not derived from the magical-girl genre but from *sentai* superhero shows. The genealogy of both those series can be traced back not to magical-girl series, but *sentai* shows. So in other words, you can tell from this that there is a direct relationship between these shows and the beautiful fighting-girl genre."

"You're just an *otaku* splitting hairs." Captain Grace's single cutting remark knocked down all of Weddin's argumentation. Grace glared at Weddin, and Weddin gave a slight flinch but glared sharply back at her. Funny Trick tugged at Grace's sleeve but was brushed aside, while Rain Pow scowled a bit. Postarie was so flustered, you had to feel sorry for her.

Kuru-Kuru Hime clapped her hands twice and stood. "Come on, that's enough pointless chatter. Let's start practicing our group tactics next." She didn't quite manage to dispel the hostility, but still, pointing out what they were supposed to be doing next should coax their emotions in a new direction.

"Hold on, please." Weddin raised her hand. "There's something more important that we have to decide first."

"…And what was that?"

Weddin stood swiftly enough to make her skirts flutter up and spread both her hands. "We have to decide on a leader!"

After an unproductive debate between Captain Grace and Weddin, it was decided that the question of who should be their leader should be resolved democratically, and Weddin won by a single vote. Weddin instructed them to "go along with the leader's decision if anything happens." At first, nobody realized this was part of her magic, so nobody reacted, but after she'd repeated the same instruction three times, everyone finally figured out what she was trying to say. Though some were reluctant, some seemed to hate the idea, others were affable, and others showed no expression at all, they agreed.

It looks like things are settled for now, Kuru-Kuru Hime thought, but right then, she got a poke in the shoulder. She turned around to find Tepsekemei hovering there, legs crossed.

"What about Mei?"

Kuru-Kuru Hime didn't understand what she was being asked, but she couldn't reply that she didn't understand what Tepsekemei meant, either. So all she answered was, "Believe in yourself."

☆ Captain Grace (Time remaining: eighteen hours, fifty-three minutes)

Captain Grace, a.k.a. Umi Shibahara, had a secret base.

The term "secret base" was indeed pirate-like; the reality, not so much. It wasn't a treasure island or an underwater cave. It was an apartment building located on the outskirts of B City, in a former flophouse district. It was old enough that anyone who was around when it had been built was long gone, and no one was living there now, either. The location was inconvenient, so even if it were eventually renovated, whether or not people would actually occupy it was anyone's guess. The same was true for knocking it down to make a parking lot.

Nothing could really be done about this property, which had belonged to her grandfather, so when Umi had pestered him for a secret hideout, he'd handed it over to her. Umi owned it legally, too.

She had been bringing in furniture and household items bit by bit for a long time now, making it more comfortable to live in. There were locks and working utilities, too. Though it looked run-down, Umi thought it passed for a fine home. As a secret base for magical girls, it was a little lacking, but there was no way around that.

Once their discussions and magic demonstrations were over, the group decided to break for one hour. Grace and Funny Trick were seated facing each other at opposite ends of a mahogany table. On the table were two coffee cups and saucers. Captain Grace had brought these furnishings out from the vessel she could summon with her magic, a pirate ship that could race quickly across the water. Since the ship itself was pretty big, she had to choose the right place to summon it. She'd brought it out on the school sports fields after everyone had gone home, hauled out everything that seemed useful, and then dismissed it. Its furnishings were all magical items that wouldn't break, even when handled with the intense strength of magical girls.

Her expression uneasy, Funny Trick said to Grace, "Listen…"

"What?"

"Don't do that again."

"Do what?"

"You were arguing with Weddin."

“Oh, that.” Grace snorted. Kayo had been like this ever since they’d been little. Umi got worked up easily, so it was Kayo’s job to placate her and keep her in check. It was an appropriate personality for a partner of hers to have, but sometimes, she could be too timid. Umi wished Kayo would be a little bolder, even if to a lesser degree than Umi herself. “She’s just getting cocky ’cause she’s a little stronger than before. She said some stuff about being the leader, but it’s not like that’s official or anything. She’s just a smug idiot.”

“Maybe you could try to get along more.”

“Maybe I should let her have it.”

“That’s exactly what I told you not to do!”

Captain Grace knocked back her steamed milk and banged her cup back down on the table. She had been right to predict that a cup for magical girls would not break from such a shock, but the bottom of it hammered a circular indent in the mahogany table. Grace cursed quietly, and this time, she lowered the cup slowly. “You got a problem with what I’m doing, Kayo?”

“I don’t mean that…”

Kayo was timid, but when Umi did something, she would follow. That was what made her Umi’s partner. She hadn’t changed since back when they had read adventure stories together in the elementary school library.

“So you just have to be quiet and follow me, just like always. You won’t regret it. I’ll make sure you won’t come out on the losing end.”

☆ Postarie (Time remaining: eighteen hours, forty minutes)

At Tatsuko’s side were Kaori and one other: the magical girl in the wedding dress. The three of them were sitting in a circle on the roof of the apartment building.

“Now, if you’d please take a look.”

Weddin passed a university notebook emblazoned with a *1* to Tatsuko. When she opened it, she found lines of tidy, small handwriting. It listed the unique characteristics of magical girls: strengthened physical capabilities; night vision; sharpened senses; no longer needing to eat, sleep, or expel waste; an unusual toughness; and that their transformed selves were beautiful girls. Then there were the rules: Try to avoid being seen by regular

people as much as possible; don't reveal your identity to anyone; and make sure to follow Toko's orders. Recorded together with these things were some fairly detailed and specific numbers. Her handwriting was good. And painstaking, apparently. Every letter, without exception, had a tilt that rose diagonally up and to the right.

"So there's this many benefits."

Postarie looked up from the notebook and examined Weddin. There was something argumentative about her tone and her actions, which seemed to contradict her bridal-gown costume and its connotations of indisputable joy. Even her magical ability to force people to keep their promises was contentious.

"Toko promised that if we become full-fledged magical girls for her, then we can stay that way forever. All these benefits would be a great advantage to our day-to-day lives. Oh! I was also thinking we could come up with a pose for when we all assemble. Do you have any ideas? I'm not quite sure if that's the sort of thing that magical girls do, but since there are seven of us, I think we could use our numbers to emphasize our beauty as a group."

"I see." Rain Pow was frequently offering appreciative interjections, like "Of course" and "I agree," to pacify Weddin, and after they parted ways, she exhaled a single tiny sigh.

"And so…" After splitting with Weddin, Rain Pow and Postarie caught Tepsekemei floating around above the road in front of the apartment building. Her body and her dancing-girl costume from Arabia or wherever were both half-transparent, like vapor, and they could see the building behind her. "You two want to know about Mei's magic."

"Yeah, we do."

It was fair to say that Tepsekemei had the skimpiest outfit of the group. Unlike the other girls, who looked "cute" or "cool," Postarie's first impression of her was "sexy."

Postarie also thought that she was by far the least sociable, too. It wasn't just that she didn't smile. Her expression didn't change at all. She kept a straight face, not showing anger or sadness or anything. It was normal for a group of young women to compete over their looks. And yet even in such an environment, Tepsekemei was unfriendly, blunt, and quite casual, seeming neither entertained nor bored.

Very often, a woman with such an attitude would be excluded from the group. Postarie, with more than ten years' experience of being excluded, knew this painfully well. From Postarie's perspective, Tepsekemei hovered high and away from the crowd, especially given she had not originally been a human. And not just in the literal sense.

"Since becoming a magical girl, Mei has realized something." The wind blew, and Tepsekemei's form wavered. "Mei is Mei. I am not myself. Mei was always Mei."

Postarie looked at Rain Pow beside her. She was smiling, but she must have been just as baffled as Postarie was.

"Um, what might you mean by that?"

"Mei's whole life was spent at the bottom of a hell she couldn't crawl out of. Mei didn't even notice it was the depths of hell or how everything in it was pain. That's what Mei means by realizing something."

Tepsekemei transformed into vapor once more, leaned against a rust-covered pillar, then wrapped herself around a disintegrating cardboard box soaked in rainwater. The box was ripped to scattered shreds with a light snapping sound. "Next thing you know, Mei's able to do things like this. Mei can't break anything too sturdy, though." She slipped into a rain gutter and then ruptured it from the inside. "Mei can deliver messages." She split into five Tepsekemeis and then again into ten. "Mei can use this to startle someone." The ten forms fused to become one giant Tepsekemei. "Mei can go back to normal real quick." She stabbed her pointer finger into her own head, and with a deflating sound, she returned to her original size. "Mei likes banging air into things." She stretched her arms to five times their length, took the broken gutter in hand, and threw it into the air. Making a gun shape with her hand, she said the word "bang," and in midair, the gutter burst open.

"Try hitting Mei," she said.

"Huh? Me?" Rain Pow pointed to herself.

"Try."

"Hey, I can't just do that out of the—"

"Just do it."

"But, like…" Rain Pow scratched the back of her head, turning toward Postarie with the weak smile of someone indeed at a loss. Then, without warning, she stepped toward Tepsekemei and took a

swing at her. Before Postarie even had the time to be startled by her sudden move, Tepsekemei's form changed like some amorphous creature, entwining Rain Pow's arm mid-punch. When Tepsekemei turned back to normal, she had Rain Pow's upper body held fast, her right elbow and shoulder in an arm lock. Tepsekemei knocked Rain Pow to the ground and held her down.

She then released her, took her hand, and pulled her up. Postarie cried out in surprise, clapping her hands, and Rain Pow, now on her feet, followed suit.

"Wow! That was amazing!"

"I didn't even know how you pulled that last move on me!"

The both of them positively giddy, Postarie said, "That was so cool!" and they turned back to Tepsekemei only to be startled again.

Tepsekemei was looking at them with an expressionless face. "What do you guys think will happen now?"

Rain Pow looked at Postarie imploringly. Postarie gave a small shake of her head, looking back at Rain Pow. She didn't understand what Tepsekemei was trying to say.

"Haven't you noticed?"

"Um… Noticed what?"

"We've gained something amazing. Mei doesn't want to lose it. That's why Mei will fight. Making use of everything. Because of this life. Mei is Mei. Mei can't die, if Mei wants to still be Mei. Dying was very scary. Mei didn't know. But you should know. Isn't that right?"

"Uhhh…yeah. I guess…that's true."

Tepsekemei floated cross-legged in the sky. Postarie didn't know what she was looking at. Her gaze didn't even seem focused in the first place. She was blinking and her eyes were moving, but it didn't feel as if she was looking at anything. Her expression seemed fake, too.

"I wonder why. Thinking is so difficult." Still floating, she rode the wind toward the mountain.

Neither Rain Pow nor Postarie could call out to stop her and so watched her go. Postarie wasn't sure if, ultimately, she could just chalk this up to being a different species, or not.

☆ **Weddin (Time remaining: eighteen hours, twenty-two minutes)**

It was safe to assume that Weddin had processed enough information to satisfy her. She put her pen down and read over her notebook once more. This information should be useful when coordinating with others during combat.

The issue was sharing this information. Kuru-Kuru Hime was a teacher to begin with, so she had a good memory. Rain Pow absorbed things quickly as well, and she would even help Postarie out.

It was the remaining three who were the problems. Captain Grace didn't care to consider the finer details of things. And Funny Trick was always with her, so Weddin could hardly talk to her at all. Tepsekemei was a waste of effort. Weddin couldn't even tell if the girl was listening to what she was saying.

"Funny Trick's magic is to switch two hidden things, and Captain Grace's is a very fast ship. For Grace's magic, rather than just using the boat, using its equipment is the right choice—on land, at least."

"Got it."

"So then, what about your magic?"

"Mei eats air."

"…I don't think that's quite it, but let's go with that. And what about Funny Trick's magic?"

"Who's Funny Trick?"

"Okay. One more time, from the top."

Someone regarded as unintelligent might be called "monkey-brains." But compared to Tepsekemei pretransformation, even a monkey might be considered a genius.

It wasn't as if she had no desire to learn. She just *couldn't* learn. And it wasn't as if she couldn't learn *anything*. There were things she could and things she couldn't.

"Weddin's the leader."

"That's right."

"Why're you the leader?"

"Because it was decided democratically."

"But you're weak."

"…You may think so, but please don't say it. And in the first place, how can you remember *my* name properly when you can't remember anyone else's at all?"

"Because you're Weddin?"

Weddin held her head in her hands. As the class representative,

she had tutored classmates with lower marks—to win over her teachers, of course. However, those people were human, and they attended a private school, so they'd all have to have the scholastic ability to get in, at least.

Right now, she was dealing with a being that, until yesterday, had been just a tortoise. Mine had fed it a number of times. She'd even thought it was cute. But she'd never thought of the creature as an equal.

—I mean, it's a tortoise.

How on earth was she supposed to get her to learn?

As you'd expect, she was smarter now than when she was in her original form. Just understanding human language and being able to communicate took her beyond tortoise level. But question of her intelligence aside, the issue was that she had no habit of learning.

Unlike Grace, Tepsekemei had the desire to learn, so Weddin really did want to help her out somehow. Among all the members of their group, Tepsekemei's magic could be particularly multipurpose in its use, be it in a support, reserve, or offensive role. So if she could work together with the rest of them, it would really strengthen their forces.

Weddin lifted her head, glancing up to see Tepsekemei staring at her with a terrifying expression, like a beast baring its fangs. Panicking, Weddin backed away, stepped on the skirt of her veil, and fell straight onto her butt. "Wh-what is it? If you're unhappy about something, could you at least put it into words?"

Teeth still bared, Tepsekemei tilted her head, confused. "Mei is smiling."

"Nobody smiles like that!"

"How should Mei smile?"

So Tepsekemei didn't know how to smile? Now that Weddin thought about it, tortoises didn't make facial expressions to communicate. Sea turtles would shed tears during spawning season, but they did that to expel salt from their eyes and not because they were sad or in pain.

"Um, well… First, lift your cheeks."

"Like this?"

"No, that's scary. Not like that. The cheeks go like *this*."

"Like this?"

"Ugh! Geez, this is tedious. I'll adjust your face myself, so please just remember how I put it." Touching Tepsekemei's face,

Weddin adjusted the positions of her eyebrows and cheeks. When her fingertips touched her cheeks, she was startled by their softness. A magical girl's skin was smooth and silky.

"That tickles."

"Just deal with it."

Somehow, Weddin was able to make a shape resembling a smile. She took half a step back to examine Tepsekemei's face from various angles. It was a little stiff, but you could call it a smile. "Right, then remember this shape."

Before Weddin was done giving that instruction, Tepsekemei's expression returned to its original blank look. She looked up into the sky, muttered, "They're here," and disappeared with a whooshing sound.

Then, as Tepsekemei shot up into the sky, someone descended onto the roof of the apartment building with a *thump* to take her place. She wore a katana on her back and a fluttering scarf, and one of her eyes was closed with a large scar. Her shuriken-shaped hair clip and her costume, despite its chain mail-like parts, was ninja-themed.

CHAPTER 5
SHOWDOWN

☆ **Archfiend Pam (Time remaining: eighteen hours, fourteen minutes)**

The enemy had let their guard down. They must have gotten cocky after driving away their pursuers once. Or had they judged their side was stronger, because of their numbers? Archfiend Pam hated people like that more than anything. Even when a fight felt easy, you had to give it your all. There was no such thing as certain victory.

The car drove along in the direction Mana's staff pointed, while above, Archfiend Pam caught sight of the enemy in her observations of the area. What looked like a group of magical girls was on the roof of an old apartment building, talking to one another.

On the battlefield, the one who found their opponent first would have the advantage.

Archfiend Pam immediately informed the others of her discovery, and they built their strategy. 7753 and Mana would be on standby in a safe place, while Hana would attack from the apartment entrance, Ripple from the roof, and Archfiend Pam from the sky above.

Archfiend Pam's magical phone rang. That was her cue to strike. She was looking down on the world below, deciding on the best moment to do it. Right when she was thinking, *Okay, let's go*, the opponent struck first. Though Archfiend Pam's attention had been focused elsewhere, she never let her guard down. She'd already been informed that one of their opponents could fly. She slipped out of the way of the enemy attack, which flew at her from below like the wind, and transformed one wing into the shape of a

giant fist to punch them in a counterattack. She held back, so as not to kill her opponent.

But as the fist and her opponent crossed paths, the fist sank into her enemy's face, and Archfiend Pam scowled. She had held back, but she'd never felt any sense of resistance in the first place. Her enemy's crushed face regenerated before her eyes.

Her appearance was reminiscent of an Arabian-style dancing girl. However, her body was faintly transparent.

—She seems like a strong one.

Noticing how happy this made her, Archfiend Pam hurriedly shook those feelings off. This wasn't the time.

The enemy threw something at her. Archfiend Pam changed one of her wings into a shield and tilted it to let the projectile slide off. It seemed what had flown at her was a ball of air, only middling in force. Even if it had hit, it probably wouldn't have killed her. *Maybe she's going easy on me*, Archfiend Pam thought as glee bubbled up within her once more.

The balls of air grew larger in number and intensity as they flew at her. Archfiend Pam responded by reinforcing her shield as she circled around the area. The enemy moved, too. She flew freely after Archfiend Pam with strange movements, elongating her torso, detaching her arms and such.

Archfiend Pam's magic was to manipulate her four wings in any way she pleased. They weren't just for flying. She could control every single thing about them at will: size, color, shape, speed, and hardness. She could also separate them from her body and have them act independently.

While Archfiend Pam was engaged with the enemy, she sent out two of her wings. One of them went to the apartment building below. She ordered it to storm in, back up her allies, and attack the enemy. Though it was only one, it was very good at continuous battle. It was slower and less accurate on its own than it was when Archfiend Pam was operating it directly, but it would beat down any normal magical girl, even a group of them. It would be able to support Ripple and Hana.

She turned the other wing into a giant winged eyeball and had it search the area for enemies. It could see as well as a telescope and observe the world below in detail. She ordered it to check on 7753 and Mana's station wagon and to immediately meet and strike back against any attacking foe, while prioritizing the defense of

their forces. She had considered leaving it by the station wagon from the beginning, but her wings weren't that smart when they were acting independently. She didn't know how the situation might change, either, so she wanted to keep her wings close as long as possible.

As Archfiend Pam sent off two of her wings on their own, the attack from her enemy continued. She tried turning her remaining two wings into blades to cut at the enemy, into whirling propellers, and even sticky traps. Although the enemy's form might temporarily come apart, she would return to her original state immediately. It wasn't working.

This enemy was strong. Archfiend Pam broke into a smile.

She enlarged her wings, making a sphere thirty feet in diameter to slam into her opponent.

She made them emit light in an attempt to blind her enemy.

It didn't work. Her opponent slipped through every smashing blow. Meanwhile, the pellets of air the enemy was tossing at her were sharp like blades. Her movements were becoming more and more intense, and she was slipping among her own air blades, trying to get close enough to grab Pam.

Gradually, Archfiend Pam came to understand: The enemy was air itself. Pam could cut it or hit it, but none of that would work. Her foe flew freely and quickly through the sky like wind. She would be captured by no one.

The dancing girl's expression never changed. She wasn't enjoying this, and neither did she seem frightened. She took Pam's strikes dispassionately and countered. Exactly the sort of attitude Archfiend Pam liked.

She was indeed strong. But not someone Pam couldn't beat.

Archfiend Pam took the wing she'd been using as a shield and spread it to cover her whole body completely. She would look like a pitch-black human silhouette. She expanded her remaining wing in a wide disc above her head, covering an area of about one hundred and fifty square feet. She gave this wing no offensive abilities at all.

The enemy was attacking more fiercely now. With nothing blocking them anymore, the blades of air cut the wing suit covering Archfiend Pam to pieces. Pam took the hits, and by regenerating the suit continuously, managed to weather it. All she had to do was endure. This suit had two purposes: to buy her time by blocking attacks and insulate her. Inside the suit, Archfiend Pam muttered,

"*Cocytus*."

The enemy's attacks started slowing down. Her blank expression was finally changing. She wasn't yet at the point of pain, but she was gradually realizing that something was strange. She was flying more slowly, and her blades were growing duller. Once Pam's wing suit was covered in dense frost, the enemy stopped attacking and suddenly shot up in the air.

—So she's finally figured it out. But it's too late.

Her enemy used air. So then all Pam had to do was make the air unusable. By reducing the density of one wing, spreading it out above herself, and vastly decreasing its surface temperature, she'd gradually been lowering the temperature of the whole area. A gas can't stay a gas if you take its heat away.

Archfiend Pam flew up into the sky after the fleeing enemy.

☆ Toko (Time remaining: eighteen hours, thirteen minutes)

Toko figured it might end up like this. She spat on the ground.

The girls had said such reasonable-sounding things about how they needed to get ready, and they'd improve their coordination and whatnot, but in fact, they'd just been having a bit of fun. They'd been trying to get more enjoyment out of the overwhelming powers dropped in their laps, and after letting their enemy get away after a single battle, they'd decided they knew what all their enemies were capable of and let their guards down.

Toko had let her guard down, too. She'd learned that the enemy had lost their ability to search for them. And since no one approached in the few hours since the barrier had been erected, she'd felt as if perhaps staying quietly hidden away was better than doing anything. There was also a part of her that had been hesitant to incite the magical girls to act.

She could hear cries coming from the roof and fierce clashes from the lower floors. The enemy was attacking from both directions. In which case, she just had to escape through any avenue she could. This room was on the second floor of the three-story apartment building, and of course, it had windows, too. Putting her full body weight into it, Toko turned the crescent lock and slid the window open. It was rusty, but she managed somehow. She'd gauged the escape routes when she'd first come here.

As Toko leaned out the window, she thought for a moment.

Should she contact her partner? But since this was turning into such a big ruckus, her partner was sure to know they were being attacked. And would she even have the time to accept the call if Toko did make contact? If she had that kind of time, she should be doing something else. Toko felt uneasy about escaping on her own, but if she were to stay on the battlefield, worst case, she might hold her partner back. That would be a disaster. Her partner knew how to survive. If they made appropriate use of their pawns, things should work out somehow.

Toko made up her mind. She would not contact her partner. The barrier already had less than twenty hours left. First, Toko would concentrate everything she had on escaping. If she fled by wing, not many magical girls would be able to follow her.

Toko jumped out of the window, aiming for the sky above, when she made eye contact with a ninja jumping down from the apartment building roof.

Toko's eyes widened as she looked at her opponent. The girl had one arm, and a scar ran down the left side of her face, sealing her eye shut. Her looks were striking. There was no way you'd forget that face once you saw it, but she wasn't familiar to Toko. She hadn't been present when they'd fought in the street. Was she their external backup?

In contrast with Toko's expression, there was not a hint of surprise on the ninja's face as she reached calmly out to Toko. Toko twisted to avoid her, but the ninja's pinkie nail caught on the sash of her skirt, and the fairy lost her balance in midair. The ninja turned her wrist to get her fingers around Toko's torso—but right before she tightened her grip, someone else came in from the side to snatch Toko away.

The rainbow atop the magical girl's back glittered brilliantly even in the dark as she snatched up Toko and dashed off across another rainbow.

"Rain Pow!" Toko cried out.

☆ Rain Pow (Time remaining: eighteen hours, twelve minutes)

Just as her appearance suggested, Rain Pow's magic was to create rainbows. But these were no ordinary rainbows. There's hardly a

soul who hasn't seen a picture book or children's show featuring a rainbow bridge for the characters to cross. What Rain Pow created was strong enough to walk on. Her power was especially magical.

In the starless and moonless night, the pale shine of the rainbow bridge contrasted with the wholesome beauty of its daytime counterpart. It had the beauty of the perilous, subtle and profound—fantastical. It was not flexible, but hard and firm. Even aggressive stomps from the strong legs of a magical girl wouldn't make it budge. With its five feet or so of width, a magical girl could run across it at full speed, no matter how high she went.

B City could not at all be called a big city, and aside from the entertainment district, there were only a few scattered lights here and there. It wasn't a particularly eye-catching view. The rainbow bridge stretched out across rows of houses with corrugated roofs, avoiding the radio station building.

Rain Pow made her rainbow bridge and raced toward the far end as it continued to grow.

Timidly, Postarie ran after her. There had been no need for Postarie to force herself to follow, but the two of them had been together when the attack had commenced, and since she was scared to leave her friend, Postarie ended up playing rear guard. Of course, the ninja was chasing after them. It was too late for Postarie to run in a different direction, so she kept going, desperation on her face.

"Rain Pow! You're too slow! Go faster! Faster, faster!"

"You're distracting me! Shut up, Toko!" Rain Pow stuffed Toko down her shirt. She could hear a pained-sounding moan from her chest area, perhaps because she had stuck the fairy in headfirst. But even if Toko was hurt a bit, it was best to leave her in there for now.

The ninja was hot on their heels, not falling back even an inch. In fact, she was gradually getting closer. There had been twenty yards between them before, but she'd already narrowed it down to fifteen. It was clear why: The ninja was fast—or rather, Postarie was slow. But it was impossible to tell Postarie to run faster. She was doing her best. Rain Pow could hear her panting hard behind her.

Right when Rain Pow's attention was on Postarie, something flew at her from in front. Distracted, Rain Pow was taken by surprise, and she couldn't dodge it. But she couldn't slow down, either, so she just barely managed to kick down the thing flying at her. From the impact against her boots and the sound it made,

whatever had been flung at her had been metal.

A second and then a third flew at her. Rain Pow understood what they were. These were ninja weapons: kunai. As the ninja chased them, she was throwing kunai that passed by both Postarie and Rain Pow, spinning in a big circle to fly at her from the front.

Rain Pow kicked away the second one in the same manner as the first and tried to avoid the third, but the weapon changed its trajectory at an acute angle to chase down Rain Pow's leg, slicing open her flesh. Rain Pow staggered, but she couldn't fall here or slow down. Clenching her teeth, she raced over the rainbow.

"A-are you okay?!"

"Don't worry about it!"

Kunai were flying at her one after another. Unable to avoid them, Rain Pow had no choice but to knock them down. And since they were all coming for her legs, she couldn't wave them aside with her hands; she was forced to kick every single one of them down. Every new kunai was now coming at her faster and harder.

All of them were aiming for Rain Pow. The enemy wasn't trying to kill her—she was gauging Rain Pow's strength and trying to disable her. This chase was so easy for the ninja that she could afford to.

Rain Pow glanced down at the ground and the evenly spaced streetlights. There were no other lights. The road below had two lanes on either side, but there weren't many cars going by. It had to be about a hundred feet from the top of the rainbow down to the ground. With the physical capabilities of a magical girl, the fall wouldn't kill her. The enemy had to be taking that into consideration, too.

Should she dispel the rainbow and jump down? Unlike the rainbow, the ground path wouldn't be a straight line, and there would be cover. It would be easier to evade…no, it wouldn't. The enemy's attacks were homing in on her. Worst case, the kunai would fly at her from a blind angle. And besides, there was her destination to take into consideration. She wanted to reach that location from the sky, if possible. The ground route would be the long way around, and it was bound to make her a target, as they'd catch her while she was going up the building. She just had to buy a bit more time.

"Tsuko! Do the thing!"

"R-r-roger!" Postarie did stutter on her acknowledgment, but

she did everything she was supposed to do. She took off her hat, and hammers came falling out of it.

Postarie's magic was postal delivery. When she took something in hand and cast her magic on it, it would grow a pair of wings. Those pure white wings were simple and beautiful, resembling those of a waterfowl, and brought to mind the angels of religious paintings. The size of the wings would be proportionate to the size of the object. They would rise up, flapping furiously, and fly off toward the object's owner. When they arrived, the wings would scatter with a *poof* and disappear. Postarie could also adjust how fast the item flew. There were two options: regular or express post.

Regular post would bob lightly away through the air. It traveled at a speed that a human could catch up to at a run, and it could safely deliver fragile packages, bottles, and dangerous objects. The express post zoomed away. It went so fast that even a magical girl, to say nothing of a human, wouldn't be able to catch up as the item was sent off to its owner at a steady and rapid pace. There were no late deliveries or postal errors. There was no weight limit, either. Neither was there any limit to the number of items that could be sent.

Each one of the hammers that fell from Postarie's hat sprouted wings. Captain Grace had bought them at the hardware store and had let Postarie hold on to them. That meant once Postarie cast her magic on them, they would fly straight for their owner, Captain Grace. Since they'd run this far in a straight line along the rainbow, of course the hammers would fly straight behind Rain Pow. Postarie's magic was not polite enough to dodge things in the middle of its path.

From behind, Rain Pow could hear the sound of metal colliding with metal. The ninja was striking back against the hammers flying at her. That meant the kunai stopped coming. From the sounds, Rain Pow could tell their pursuer had fallen back a little. If she was going to do it, it was now or never. Rain Pow turned back to scoop up Postarie in a bridal carry and then sprinted as fast as she could along the rainbow. This was much faster than keeping Postarie's pace.

It was just a few hundred more yards to her goal. Running at full speed across her rainbow, the moment she arrived at the roof of her target building, she dispelled the bridge. Leisurely kicking down the final kunai the ninja threw at her as she fell, Rain Pow then

ripped off the blue tarp that covered the roof in one pull.

This was the roof of an old, derelict building that hadn't been used in a long time. The only ones who ever came here were maintenance staff and crows. It was a convenient place to hide things.

After their first battle, Rain Pow and Postarie had worked together to hide the station wagon their enemies had abandoned in their flight on the roof of this building. Now, if Postarie cast her magic on it, the vehicle would fly off to its owner.

It was a kind of gamble as to who the owner of the station wagon was. But the chances that the owner was a fighter, like the girl attacking them, were low. If they could just get away from the heat of the fight now, it didn't matter what would happen. Best case, they might be able to catch the enemy off guard and launch a surprise attack.

Arms still around Postarie, Rain Pow tightly embraced the rear bumper of the station wagon. "Do it, Tsuko!"

"R-roger!" Postarie cast her magic on the station wagon. The half-ruined vehicle, with its broken windows and footprints on the roof, sprouted great wings on either side, and with a boom, it rose into the air.

☆ Kuru-Kuru Hime (Time remaining: eighteen hours, ten minutes)

Kuru-Kuru Hime shot out a ribbon, but Bunny Ears avoided it with a sharp spin in the air. Kuru-Kuru Hime sent out even more ribbons, but all of this was a diversion. She didn't plan to have a straight fight. It seemed very unlikely to her that she could beat this enemy one-on-one, when before she had only barely managed to beat her by ganging up on her with a bunch of allies.

"Settle down! If you don't resist, you won't get kicked or punched!" The bunny girl's oddly specific mention of kicking and punching made her orders sound more like a threat than an attempt to convince her. Kuru-Kuru Hime ran. If she could find some help, at least, then it would work out somehow. Maybe.

Wrapping a ribbon around a telephone pole, she kicked off the ground and pulled. From there, she wrapped another one around an emergency escape ladder installed at the back of the apartment

building, and as she pulled that one, she kicked off the telephone pole. With the combined strength of her legs and her ribbons, she could move faster and more freely than normal, but…

"Running's no use! Surrender!" Bunny Ears was keeping close behind her. She had better footwork and reflexes. This meant running wasn't an option.

Kuru-Kuru Hime just had to meet up with someone, anyone. She moved from the emergency ladder to the telephone pole, the telephone pole to the wall of the apartment building, that wall to the roof of someone's house, and from there to the roof of the apartment building. She tried to trip her opponent by stringing a thin ribbon between two telephone poles, but Bunny Ears spun in midair to avoid it easily.

The two of them confronted each other on the roof of the apartment building. The area was about sixty-five square feet. The total lack of maintenance meant it was in a sad state of disrepair, crumbling and cracking to pieces here and there, with weeds sprouting from the cracks.

Here was the ally she'd been looking for. But she was not in the state Kuru-Kuru Hime had hoped. Weddin was splayed out on her back with what looked like pegs stabbing through various places in her costume—sleeves, skirt, veil. She had been immobilized in the form of a crucifix.

"Kuru-Kuru Hime! I'm so glad to see you! I fought to the best of my ability, too! But that fucking ninja! What a clever trick, immobilizing me with her kunai! Please, save me first!"

Fortunately, she wasn't hurt. However, she wouldn't be of any help to Kuru-Kuru Hime. In fact, she'd slow her down. Bunny Ears glanced at Weddin, smiled pleasantly, and said, "I'll save you, so surrender to me."

"Huh? Who are you? Is someone else here? The enemy?"

"You too, ribbon girl. Just give in already. Neither of you wants to get hurt, right?"

Grace had insisted that approaching Bunny Ears had caused an unusual ache in her wound and sent her pain off the charts, but they still had yet to grasp what sort of magic Bunny Ears used, specifically. Could Kuru-Kuru Hime even win against an enemy like that on her own?

"You say we can surrender, but there would be conditions for that, wouldn't there?" Weddin said, still pinned to the ground.

“You also have the option of unconditional surrender.”

“Would our lives be spared?”

“We’re not gonna kill you or anything.”

“Would we be able to remain as magical girls?”

“That’d depend on the person, I think.”

“I can’t surrender without more details on that point.”

“I’m impressed you can talk like that when you can’t even move, as far as I can tell.”

Weddin and Bunny Ears’s unproductive exchange seemed to go on forever. That was when Kuru-Kuru Hime realized. Weddin—Mine Musubiya—didn’t like idle chatter. She did have the *otaku* habit of rambling on and on about topics she liked or her personal opinions, but otherwise, she preferred brief conversations to lengthy dialogue.

“To what extent is my situation here related to our conditions of surrender? I may be incapacitated, but my allies are all safe.”

“Aren’t we talking about *your* conditions for surrender?”

“As their leader, I have the obligation and right to discuss the state of our allies as a whole.”

“The *self-proclaimed* leader.”

“How rude! I’m our official leader, chosen through a democratic process.”

Bunny Ears shrugged with apparent exasperation. Weddin’s voice rose with passion as she spoke. She was trying to drag out the conversation.

Sensing Weddin’s intention, Kuru-Kuru Hime set to work. Smoothly unraveling a thin ribbon hidden behind her back, she lengthened it by connecting several ribbons together. Taking special care to avoid the enemy’s attention, she snaked the elongated ribbon along the ground. The roof was falling apart, with cracks all over the place. She slid her ribbon into one of them, letting it slither underneath the roof’s surface toward Bunny Ears.

“So if I surrender, that means we all surrender. Please put a little more effort into your attempt to win me over. For instance, even if you do steal our right to be magical girls, if you show us other kindnesses, such as financial compensation, then we can feel good about surrendering, can’t we?”

“You’re not in a position to be receiving any financial compensation, though.”

“Then can’t you contact your superior officer now? Discussions

to resolve something so important should be left to those in charge, right?"

"Um, but, well, y'know…"

"I'm sure we can reach a compromise that will satisfy both parties."

The ribbon passed under the concrete to Bunny Ears's feet, then sprang out of a crack to grab at her leg. Kuru-Kuru Hime couldn't get a firm grasp on it, but Bunny Ears started to lose her balance. Kuru-Kuru Hime unleashed all her ribbons and shot toward Bunny Ears in one dash. Bunny Ears swept aside the first ribbon and dodged the second, but Kuru-Kuru Hime kept shooting them out one after another, a third and a fourth, tangling up an arm, taking a leg, taking her target's freedom a bit at a time. As Kuru-Kuru Hime was burying Bunny Ears's arms, legs, and torso in ribbons, Bunny Ears tugged back on them, hard. Kuru-Kuru Hime jerked in closer to her opponent.

Bunny Ears' magic might be to amplify pain. So then if Kuru-Kuru Hime were to get even the slightest injury, she would lose. Of course, she wasn't confident she could withstand unusual pain. She had to be sure to block the enemy's attacks.

Kuru-Kuru Hime unraveled her costume. It may not have looked like it, but her entire costume was made up of ribbons. She undid her pointe shoes, her tutu, and even her crown.

Kuru-Kuru Hime shifted her ribbons around as she felt the chilly November wind against her bare skin. Maintaining the number of ribbons sent out to attack, she also arranged some more for defense. She built them into a wall between the enemy and herself. She also reached out to tie some more around the iron railing of the apartment building in an attempt to stabilize her position.

Ignoring the wall, Bunny Ears tugged again. A number of the strips wrapped around the iron railing were ripped away. Kuru-Kuru Hime braced her legs, but she couldn't hold her ground. She inched closer to Bunny Ears, but the wall was still there. Rooted firmly in the roof, the wall resisted. Kuru-Kuru Hime was still being dragged in, but Bunny Ears couldn't yank her in one pull.

Kuru-Kuru Hime deployed ribbon after ribbon even as Bunny Ears reeled her in, but right when she'd completely wrapped her opponent to restrain her, something strange happened. The smell of exhaust fumes rushed up her nostrils, and intense nausea welled up

inside her. Her vision was off. Things receded and then approached again over and over, and she couldn't get a proper sense of where anything was or what it was. Her eardrums shuddered with noise, the shock of it rattling her brain.

Kuru-Kuru Hime hit her knees, but even that impact was too much for her to take, and she let out a cry and collapsed. Her knees throbbed in pain. Agony shot through her all at once, from the top of her head to the tips of her toes.

"Too bad, you entered my area of effect…" were the words she heard right before she lost consciousness.

☆ Captain Grace (Time remaining: eighteen hours, ten minutes)

Commotion sounded from the roof and the first floor, and after that, she heard cries. Should she head up to the roof or downstairs? Captain Grace chose the first floor and rushed down the staircase. The sound of Funny Trick's footsteps followed her.

She jumped down ten steps, heading for the building entrance, where she stopped. No one was there. "Hey, Kayo."

"What?"

"Nobody's here. What's up with that?"

"How should I know?"

Grace spread her palms and cupped them against her ears. She focused her hearing. The sounds of struggle continued. "Okay, let's go to the roof—," she started to say, then looked up. Among the commotion, she could also faintly hear the beating of wings, like something was flapping toward them.

Focusing her eyes in the dark, Captain Grace discovered a strange creature flying their way at a relatively slow pace. *Is this some new type of magical girl?* she wondered, but it wasn't. It was a sphere about three feet in diameter, black all over, seemingly made of a rubberlike material. It flapped two bat-like wings to stay in the air.

"…What's that?"

"…I dunno."

It was no one she knew. Though it was moving, it was doubtful if it was even a living thing. The black sphere stopped above them in midair, about fifteen feet up, and remained there. Grace observed

the sphere's movements. It was just hovering. Clearly something magical.

After some time suspended in the air, the sphere started to move. It was going up. Was it aiming for the roof? Grace was annoyed, feeling as if she'd been ignored.

"Hey! Don't ignore me!" She scooped up a piece of concrete from the ground at her feet and flung it at the sphere. The sphere bobbed away to avoid it, like a balloon blown in the wind. Its light movements seemed in conflict with its sluggish appearance.

The concrete chunk rolled along the road. The sphere halted its ascent and changed shape. Funny Trick yelped, but excitement boiled in the depths of Captain Grace's heart. An eye emerged from the sphere. Or rather, it would be more accurate to say that its eyelid split open. A single, giant eyeball gazed down on them.

It was asking, *Are you an enemy?*

So then Captain Grace would reply. "Come on and attack me already!"

The sphere's giant eye closed, and all traces of it melted away. Its black wings stopped beating, and it went into free fall. As it came down, the wings shrank, and by the time it landed, it had taken the shape of a human. And it hadn't just changed shape. She could tell its mass had clearly increased. It was smooth all over, with no features to speak of.

Captain Grace drew her sword. The black silhouette ran toward her.

She swung the blade, slipping through her opponent's guard to slice open its torso—no, that wasn't right. She hadn't cut it open. A large mouth opened up in it, with teeth on the top and bottom that clenched around her blade to bring it to a halt. She couldn't push it in or pull it out. Its bite had more power than Captain Grace had muscle.

Releasing her sword, she was trying to back away when the enemy attacked. She attempted to block its low kick with her shin, but its leg bent like rubber, attempting to wrap around her shin. She panicked and shook it off. All of its attacks were transformative in nature. When its fist hit her, it bent like a whip to snap at her back, and the front kick she tried to block with her shoulder transformed into a blade that drew blood. Arms, legs, and tentacles like those of an octopus or squid emerged from its black body one after another to assail her.

She had no choice but to focus on evasion, and ultimately, evasion turned to flight. Just barely managing her enemy's attacks, Grace dashed down the street.

Her plan had been to handle this thing quickly, then head over to where Bunny Ears was and take her down, too. But this opponent was too much for Captain Grace to handle.

Her plan weakly crumbled away.

Desperately, she dodged, blocked, knocked down, and swept aside the thing's attacks, and when she was trying to knock down yet another strike, it changed its trajectory. Its tentacle dodged Grace's sword and plunged toward her, and though she jerked around to avoid it, another strike followed it and injured the top of her foot.

Funny Trick was running for them with a stick raised in her hands, but Captain Grace stopped her with a yell. "Stay back! You've got a different job!"

The black human shape was focused on Grace alone. It was firing off a rapid barrage of attacks on her, completely ignoring Funny Trick. Grace could sense no emotion in its actions. She had the strong impression that it was attacking automatically. She couldn't pick up on any chivalrous urge for a one-on-one fight, nor could she sense it was a rational being with a desire to take out the strongest first.

Grace figured that maybe this thing only saw those that attacked it as its enemies. So that meant Captain Grace was its enemy right now, but it had yet to count Funny Trick as hostile. Funny Trick was free to go where she wanted. While Grace was handling the enemy's attacks, Funny Trick could carry out a task for her.

Funny Trick must have caught on, as she turned back and retreated into the apartment building. "Good," Grace said to herself.

They were battling something strong. Among all the foes Captain Grace—Umi Shibahara—had ever fought, this was the strongest and fastest, with the most unreadable attacks and no weaknesses.

She dodged, blocked, and halted the enemy's assaults but couldn't quite defend herself, and she took more and more injuries. Her attacks were not effective at all. The quality and quantity of its methods of attack were far beyond her. She had to focus entirely on evasion or she wouldn't be able to avoid them properly, but that

meant she couldn't attack, of course. The enemy was ruthless, overbearing, and on the offensive. It cut her right upper arm, and when she recoiled, a tentacle wrapped around her left calf. A needle with a barb like a fishing hook sprouted from the tentacle and dug into her leg.

Grace bit back a moan. Her leg was bleeding a lot, but she could still move around okay. That was the most she could do now. From this point on, she would have to fight with a bum leg.

A sensation she'd never experienced before oozed up from the pit of her stomach.

—Never experienced before?

No, she *had* experienced this before. It was just such an old memory, she'd forgotten the feeling. Grace's brain searched all the way back when she had encountered a wild dog in the mountains at the age of three.

Yes, this was fear. Grace did not take this discovery as a humiliation; rather, she turned it to joy.

Grace was a champion to the bitter end. Bunny Ears had been a fast and stubborn prey, but ultimately, prey. One who had used her magic to successfully escape but was merely a challenger to a champion.

Her opponent now was not the challenger—Grace was. This feeling of fear, her first in ten years, became euphoria that coursed through her body. She drew her dagger.

Right now, she was smack-dab in the middle of danger. She could die at any moment.

The enemy's strikes were fast, even faster than Bunny Ears's. Captain Grace channeled all her strength, all her senses, all her nerves straight into the battle. She smacked down a casual thrust from the creature, read its movements and took a step in, and when it came closer to her in response, she answered with a head-butt. The silhouette creature twisted its neck, and her head struck its shoulder. She attempted to bite its throat, but the enemy didn't like that and gave her a forceful shove. When the enemy struck her leg, she kicked aside with the heel of her shoe and swiped her dagger in its path, but one of its tentacles transformed into a flat blade and parried.

As their clash continued, Grace slowly came to understand her opponent. It was like a machine, but it wasn't just reacting to what she did; it also predicted her attacks to a certain degree before it

made its moves. In other words, she could fake to outwit it.

Grace's eyes turned to the apartment building. The third window facing the road on the second floor opened, and Funny Trick appeared. Perfect timing.

Grace yelled, "Funny Trick!" With her left hand, she pulled out the hook that hung from her waist and threw it at her opponent's chest, then covered the dagger in her right hand with her cape and faced the enemy. It batted away the hook with its tentacle, and with its attention on the dagger, for a split second, it stopped in place.

The inside of Grace's cape suddenly got heavier, and she took a firm step. The dagger in her right hand had transformed instantly into a mounted cannon. She could call this timing perfect. This was her trump card.

Her enemy was a champion. She was the challenger. So she would use everything she could, and that meant *everything*—including her partner Funny Trick and the equipment on her ship.

She was certain she felt her wordless enemy's surprise. With the cape still over it, she fired her magic cannon. As the recoil blasted her backward, she pulled out another hook and dug it into the ground. It crunched and dragged through the asphalt, and when Grace's heels hit the guardrail, she finally came to a halt.

Captain Grace's magic vessel was a pirate ship. When she had summoned it for a test run on the school grounds, she'd checked what sort of equipment it had and taken out a number of potentially useful items. This cannon was one of them. She'd left it in one of the apartments, and Funny Trick had covered it up, then swapped it with the dagger hidden underneath Grace's cape.

Being that it was a magic cannon, the kick was incredible, but Captain Grace's eardrums remained intact, and she had no bruises or broken bones, either. Her right arm was a little numb, but if she was getting off this easy, then she was in great shape.

Smoke billowed up, and something appeared from within it, cutting through the smell of gunpowder that filled the area. The black humanoid shape, its upper body now gone, staggered as it tried to approach her. Even with half of its body blown away, it was still moving. The fragments were moving slowly, too, attempting to return to their original form.

Though she hadn't experimented with it beforehand, Captain Grace had personally felt the force of that cannonball. Even a magical girl would be mincemeat if they got hit by that thing. The

enemy before her could take a lot, but Grace had managed to deal some heavy damage.

But that hadn't been enough to finish it off. The enemy's ability to morph was rendering it immortal, and it was trying to regenerate. If it could recover completely, then Grace doubted she could win. If she was going to finish it off, it was now or never. She plunged her hook into the tentacle wrapped around her leg to rip it apart.

Kicking off the ground, she dashed over to the road sign fifteen feet away. Using this at close range would put herself in danger, too.

Captain Grace's power was to manifest a magic ship that could speed across water. The full length of the ship was about thirty feet. It was shaped like a sailboat, but it didn't actually require any wind power. Of course, in order to use it, she'd need a body of water of at least a certain size.

If you were going to use it the normal way, that is.

Captain Grace faced the enemy staggering toward her and summoned her ship. The overwhelming mass appeared suddenly, burying the enemy and everything around it all at once. It generated a shock and sound just like an explosion, and Grace held down her captain's hat to keep it from flying off.

What would happen if she were to summon the ship in a location that was already occupied? She'd had no idea if it would end up inside the boat, be launched away, or be crushed under it. But now she knew. When she summoned her pirate ship in a place already occupied by something the size of a human, the boat would crush it.

She'd felt something. Though she was using a method less direct than stabbing with a blade or hitting with a fist, she could still feel that she'd defeated an enemy.

When she dismissed her ship, the black thing was no more.

☆ 7753 (Time remaining: seventeen hours, fifty minutes)

7753 was standing beside the car parked on the road.

Spending time with a cranky person was always terribly awkward. And that awkwardness doubled when the person occupied a higher social position than you. 7753 had not once seen

Mana in a good mood since they had met, but now her irritation was through the roof, even compared to how she'd been before. Sitting in the back seat of the car, she was bouncing her knees hard enough to shake the vehicle.

7753 had stepped out of the car on the pretext of keeping watch, but just being able to sense Mana's intense fidgeting only made being outside even scarier.

Ripple, Hana, and Archfiend Pam had attacked from three different directions while the enemy was off guard. How closely had they followed Mana's instructions to capture and not kill, and just how much time would they even have to listen? There had been no contact.

Mana had to be irritated, both out of concern as to whether they could catch the criminal and annoyance at 7753 for not fighting despite being a magical girl. 7753 felt like Mana was being way too harsh for this just to be 7753's victim complex talking. Some magical girls were suited to combat, and some were not. 7753 was the latter. In terms of character, magic, and physical abilities, she couldn't compete with combat-based magical girls. But still, she would do what work she could. Defending the camp when combat personnel were all deployed was an important job, too. It was something she could be proud of.

But any attempts to convince Mana of that would be interpreted as the excuses of a weakling, and the most that would get her would be some yelling, disparagement, and belittling. So 7753 said nothing, and still feeling awkward, she guarded Mana.

I hope this ends safely, she prayed as she looked up at the sky. The clouds were thick. Tomorrow would be cloudy, too, and it could rain, depending; worst case, it could even snow.

That was when a loud noise split the air and ripped apart the tranquility of the night, coming from the direction of the apartment building that was the enemy's hideout. It sounded like an explosion.

Mana opened the car door and leaped out. "What was that sound?!"

"I—I don't know."

"Damn it… Was that someone's magic?"

Ripple's magic didn't include anything explosive. Neither did Hana's. If any of them had an ability like that, it would be Archfiend Pam. Or was this the enemy's doing? The road where the car was now parked was pretty far from the apartment building. So

it had to be quite a noise to reach this far. It was bound to awaken the people who lived in the neighborhood, and it was only a matter of time before the police and fire department showed up.

Mana looked toward the apartment building, and 7753 followed her gaze. A large bird was flying through the air. It was unbelievably huge. Was that just because of perspective? It looked even bigger than an ostrich.

"…Hmm? Huh?"

"What? Did something happen?"

Maybe it wasn't a bird? But by the time that thought hit her, the winged station wagon was already right in front of them. 7753 scooped up Mana and leaped to the side, and the station wagon crashed into the spot where Mana had just been an instant before with a boom even louder than the one from earlier.

☆ Rain Pow (Time remaining: seventeen hours, forty-one minutes)

Rain Pow and Postarie, clinging to the rear of the station wagon, jumped off the moment before it crashed. It had been flying so fast, the force of the wind had smooshed and jiggled Rain Pow's face. If a human were to jump off that, they would be worse than hurt. Even a normal magical girl would have ended up injured.

Rain Pow made a rainbow bridge in the air and jumped down, still holding Postarie in one arm. With her other hand on the rainbow bridge, she slowed herself until she landed with a thud. The station wagon landed—crashed—at about the same moment. The mass, speed, and distance they'd covered were all numbers to be reckoned with, and the energy generated by the fall shook the area. The sound was possibly loud enough to make a fainthearted listener pass out. Dust and asphalt particles billowed up thick. It looked just like the scene of an explosion.

"Are you okay, Tsuko?"

"…Yeah." She didn't seem okay. Her eyes were unfocused, and her mouth was still half-open. She seemed less frightened and more dazed.

Postarie had never been a girl of strong character. In fact, she was on the timid side. Rain Pow had heard that becoming a magical girl would make you mentally stronger, but still, the pretransformation-level mental strength had to be involved. Toko's declarations about "the courage to stand up and face any foe" had really been exaggerated. Maybe more like, "an ordinary person who had never even dreamed of fighting until yesterday wouldn't be rendered totally useless by their anxiety."

Getting attacked by enemies and chased down by a ninja,

fleeing atop a rainbow, and riding a flying station wagon were enough scary experiences to equal ten scream machines.

Rain Pow was just thinking her first order of business was to pep up Postarie when a voice spoke to her from inside her shirt.

"Hey, hey."

"Hmm? What?"

"Look at that." Toko, her upper body poking out of Rain Pow's neckline, pointed her finger. Figures in silhouette were moving within the thickly rising dust. Toko was pointing at two fallen figures getting up. One of them wrapped her arms around the other's shoulders, flung her person over her back, and ran off.

"You can't let them get away!"

Rain Pow was about to give chase, but she immediately stopped. Something was standing in her way. The dust gradually cleared, and soon she was able to see the figure clearly, but she still could only call it "something." The object was all black with a round body, and it hovered in midair flapping its bat-like wings.

"…What is this? Is it a mascot like you, Toko?"

"Of course not! I've never heard of anything like this. It doesn't look like a magical girl, though."

"Is it alive?"

"I dunno." Toko glared at the black sphere and cursed briefly. "Whatever it is, this means you have to beat that thing up, or you won't be able to chase after those guys that ran away, right? If we can capture them, we can use them to help with negotiations. And as long as we can negotiate, we're good."

Rain Pow grabbed the bumper of the station wagon and ripped it off. She swung it at the black sphere, but unexpectedly, it swiftly dodged the bumper.

"Whoa, that thing's fast. Hey, Toko. This isn't really a magical girl, is it?"

"Absolutely not."

The sphere changed shape, like some sort of protean creature. Rain Pow swung the bumper again, harder than before, forcing the enemy to dodge. Predicting its movement this time, she stabbed straight into it. The bumper pierced the black something—no, the black thing's body morphed and held the bumper in its orifice. It gnashed and tightened around the bumper, crumpling it.

She had no idea what this thing was, but it was fast. Strong, too. Its body was abnormally pliant and could transform freely.

Given that it was blocking the road to prevent her from chasing the pair, it had to be one of the enemy. This could be a real pain of an opponent.

"It's not a magical girl or a mascot, so… Do you think it's alive?"

"I can't say anything, just looking at it. It might not be alive, but I'm certain that magic is involved in some form or another. Probably." Upper body still sticking out, Toko sank back in again, up to her shoulders. She'd noticed its strength, too.

Slowly, Rain Pow looked back. She figured moving too fast would agitate the thing in front of her. Postarie was behind her. She looked frightened. That was an improvement. Apparently, she'd regained her powers of judgment.

"Tsuko, I've got a favor to ask. Is that okay?"

"Huh…? What?"

"Listen…"

Postarie indicated that she did not like Rain Pow's request. She said over and over she was scared and she didn't want to, cried, and begged, *"Don't make me do this,"* but she eventually caved to Toko's threats when the fairy said the thing would eventually kill them if she did nothing.

Slowly, hesitantly, she approached the black thing. Postarie looked absolutely miserable and was clearly crying. Rain Pow instructed her to touch it softly and gently, in a way that couldn't possibly be interpreted as hostile, so with shaking hands, Postarie approached the black thing and touched it.

Instantly, white bird wings sprouted out from it and it flew off like a rocket, ignoring the resistance from the bat wings. It seemed it belonged to someone, after all.

Rain Pow blew a sigh of relief, and at her chest, she could feel Toko's tension draining, too. Postarie turned back to them, wiping her tears with her sleeve. "Hey… I just wanna rest, for now."

"All right. I kinda feel the same way."

There was no objection from Toko. The pair had escaped, and Rain Pow and Postarie couldn't chase them anymore.

☆ 7753 (Time remaining: sixteen hours, twenty-five minutes)

With Mana on her back, 7753 somehow managed to escape. Simply

dodging the station wagon had been like a miracle, and it was probably another that they had managed to escape. On an apartment building roof, 7753 breathed a sigh of relief.

But the one she'd saved was apparently not thankful at all. Mana was furious. In fact, it was fair to say she had lost it. 7753 had no idea how to tell a mage's real age, but her apparent age was midteens, and since kids at that age were known for being unpredictable when they gave in to their emotions, it was quite frightening when she was this angry.

"What the hell do you think a magical girl's strength is for?! Plus, aren't you supposed to be my bodyguard?! Are you guarding me so that you can run away?! You dumbass! If I wanted to run, I could've done it alone! You should've attacked with the rest of the group!" Mana barked, yelled, and snapped in her tirade against 7753. She seemed like she might even physically lash out at her, too, but 7753 somehow managed to pacify her.

7753 told Mana that fleeing had been the best plan for that moment, and since they weren't good fighters, even if they had stayed and engaged, they were bound to have ended up burdening everyone as hostages. What she couldn't say was that her boss had told her, "It doesn't matter if you have to force her, just take Mana and run as fast as you can." And so, stuck between a rock and a hard place, she bowed her head, saying, "I apologize, I'm sorry, I had no choice, it was the best available option."

Venting her anger must have helped Mana regain some calm; even though she was still in a bad mood, she stopped yelling, screaming, and spraying spit, and instead looked down at the world below and spat, "Fucking boondocks."

They had picked out this apartment building as an emergency meeting place if the need arose, and since it was one of the few tall buildings in the city, you could see just about everything in the town from its roof. For an apartment building covered in room-for-rent signs, it wasn't a bad view.

However, sadly, she was forced to agree with Mana's assertion that this place was the "fucking boondocks." 7753's arrival here, everything she'd been forced to do since, and the epitome of an economically depressed rural town made for a disheartening combination.

Mana glared at the town, took out her magical phone, and turned it on to use. "It won't connect."

"…What?"

"What the hell's going on? I can't reach Hana's magical phone anymore."

"Um… Maybe she can't answer because she's fighting right now."

"Or she's been captured by the enemy." Mana glowered at 7753 as if to blame her retreat for this.

"But, well, Hana, of all people…"

"And just what the hell do *you* know about Hana?!"

Suspecting that any answer would get her yelled at, 7753 closed her mouth.

"Damn it… Hana, you idiot. Where the hell are you, and what are you doing…?" Mana started to pace back and forth on the roof. She wouldn't settle down.

7753 tried phoning Ripple. Just like Hana, she wouldn't answer. So she sent a text for the time being. She realized her fingers were trembling as she typed out her message saying they were waiting at the meetup point.

Neither Ripple nor Hana were answering their phones. 7753 tried calling Archfiend Pam, but that got her nothing, either. They weren't coming to the meeting place, and they wouldn't even send a single text. She felt an icy chill slowly make its way down her spine.

She sent her message to Ripple and hugged her magical phone.

Still no reply. Mana continued to pace back and forth. One lap, two laps, three; 7753 idly continued to count, and once the count was over a hundred, she gave up.

Mana continued pacing for a while after that, until ultimately, she stopped. "Why aren't they coming?"

"Huh?"

"Why aren't they coming? They aren't contacting us. Why can't we get in touch with them?!" Mana rushed up to 7753 and grabbed her by the collar. 7753 had the slightly larger physique, meaning Mana ended up pushing her up from below. 7753 was standing near the edge of the roof, and since there was no wall or fence or anything behind her, she panicked and dug in her heels. Mana was pushing her so hard that not only might she shove 7753 off the roof, it was as if Mana didn't mind falling with her. 7753 grabbed Mana's hands.

"Is she dead?!"

"Dead? They couldn't be—"

“So why aren’t they coming back?! Why can’t we contact them?!”

“Maybe there’s been some kind of mistake—”

“What mistake?!”

Hana was a veteran magical girl with a history of combat experience. She was strong enough to have been assigned to catch the assassin on her own, even without Mana and other noncombat personnel.

“No, I mean—”

“You don’t mean shit!”

“But—” 7753 couldn’t argue any further, and Mana shoved her hard.

“But what?!”

Reflexively, 7753 shook her off. Even if she was a magical girl from Magical Girl Resources, 7753 was way stronger than Mana. Mana was thrown lightly backward, flying straight back over the roof and into the entrance door. The door dented into the shape of her back, but she quickly got up again.

“I-I’m sorry, you just kept pushing me, so I suddenly…”

“Damn you… God*damn* you!” Tears gathered at the corners of Mana’s eyes. Her lower eyelashes kept them in check for a bit, but eventually, the dam burst, and tears streaked from her eyes. Mana cried as she shouted unintelligible curses. 7753 couldn’t do anything. Mana wept, wailed, and pointed her finger at 7753. “Why are you crying?!”

7753 lifted her goggles up to her forehead and gently swiped under her eyes. They were wet.

“You’ve got no right to cry!” Mana ran up to her again, putting the momentum into a slap on 7753’s cheek, then hit the opposite cheek with the back of her hand in a double slap. 7753 reflexively slapped Mana in turn, and the events of moments ago repeated themselves as Mana was launched backward, her back hitting the door.

Yelling incoherently, Mana stood up. Before 7753 could even apologize, Mana rushed toward her, and this time, Mana hit her with a closed fist to the cheekbone and jaw, and 7753 knocked Mana down with a fist from above. This was more clearly a strike, unlike the first two times where her hands had just suddenly lashed out.

Mana trembled facedown on the ground, splayed like a frog

being dissected. She moaned like a beast as she shook. 7753 checked on her through her goggles to make sure she wasn't seriously hurt. It didn't seem as if she'd fallen because 7753 had hit her in a bad spot, either.

7753 exhaled deeply, and as she did, the tears came.

Hana, Ripple, and Archfiend Pam weren't coming back. There had been no communication. No matter how many times 7753 and Mana called, they couldn't get through. Had they been captured? Or…had they been killed? *Why? Why?* she asked herself endlessly. When 7753 sniffled, Mana jerked her head up.

"I said, you've got no right to cry!" She got to her feet to kick and head-butt 7753, and when 7753 staggered, Mana punched her in the gut. The strength of her blows aside, she was attacking rather vulnerable targets. She was moving like a child having a tantrum, but she was weirdly good at this. 7753 wondered if she should maybe pin Mana down, but looking at Mana's face, messed up with tears and a bleeding nose, she lost the urge. She just covered her head and patiently endured it until the attacks stopped.

Lowering her guard, 7753 lifted her face.

"…What are you doing?" came a sudden voice.

7753 turned around. Ripple was grabbing the iron fence to nimbly hop up onto the roof and land on the concrete. She made a face when she noticed the red rust on her palms.

Having found a new outlet for her anger, this time, Mana screamed at Ripple. "And where the hell have—?!" But before she could finish her sentence, she went silent. Timidly poking her face out from behind Ripple was a ballerina-style magical girl covered in ribbons.

CHAPTER 6
THE BEGINNING OF THE END

☆ Weddin (Time remaining: seventeen hours, thirty-eight minutes)

"Ms. Himeno! Can you hear me, Ms. Himeno?"

Kuru-Kuru Hime had undone her transformation and was lying on the ground. The teacher was not responding at all to her calls. Her chest was moving up and down, so she did seem to be breathing, but she had been completely knocked out. It didn't seem as if she'd be able to help get Weddin out of this pinch.

Weddin strained with her limbs. She held her breath until her face was hot, channeling all of her strength into trying to rip up the ropes that bound her. She continued to strain right until she was nearly out of oxygen, but still, the ropes wouldn't loosen. She'd already done this many times.

All she could do now was lie on the floor. Bunny Ears had finally moved away from her, but Weddin wasn't strong enough to take advantage of this opportunity.

She understood that Bunny Ears had done something to Kuru-Kuru Hime, but she didn't know what. Even though Kuru-Kuru Hime restrained their opponent completely, she'd moaned and fallen over, undoing her transformation to return to the human Ms. Nozomi Himeno. Being part of her costume, her ribbons had disappeared at the same time. Now free, Bunny Ears had stood and walked up to Weddin, who was immobilized in a crucifixion pose.

Understanding that her plan had failed, Weddin addressed Bunny Ears. "Come on, like I said, let's stop with all this violence."

"It's okay. There won't be any more violence here." Using a rope she had pulled from her sleeve, Bunny Ears tied up Weddin's

arms and legs, removing each kunai pinning her down, one by one. Weddin hadn't been strong enough to even make them budge, but when Bunny Ears put her back into it, they slowly loosened and eventually came out.

"Isn't this violent?"

"I'm trying my best to be gentle, aren't I?"

"I wouldn't call that 'trying.'"

Bunny Ears finished pulling out all the kunai around Weddin, tied her up completely, and rolled her on her side.

Next, Bunny Ears went to tie up Ms. Himeno. Her back was facing Weddin. Weddin strained her limbs, trying to move them, but the rope was tied tight. Even with the strength of a magical girl, she couldn't rip it up.

Bunny Ears glanced back at Weddin to make sure that she was still bound, then returned to her task. "This is special magic rope made by our team chief. I think you'd have a hard time tearing it."

"So then could you untie me? I won't struggle."

"You seem like the type I'd want to be careful with."

"That's not true. People know I'm a person of character."

"You talked to me a lot to distract me before, too, didn't you?" Bunny Ears picked up Ms. Himeno with her right arm, and with her left, she took Weddin by the leg and flung her over her shoulder, upside down.

"Hey, at least put me right-side up."

"I've decided not to chat with someone who talks with the intention to deceive, like you do. So no matter what you have to say, I'm not going to listen. I'll have an easier time learning about the situation from this girl anyway."

Frustratingly enough, she was basically right.

Weddin continued to chatter, trying to talk Bunny Ears into just one verbal promise, if possible. But Bunny Ears wasn't paying any attention at all as she carried Weddin and Ms. Himeno. "I've gotta get out of here before the human police come around." She hopped off the top of the apartment building to the roof of a house.

It seemed Bunny Ears was planning to meet up with someone. She traversed the roofs of houses and commercial buildings, as well as telephone poles, to arrive at a crumpled station wagon on a destroyed road. There was a car parked on the shoulder there, too. The locals were gradually gathering down there.

Bunny Ears looked as if molten lead had just been poured down

her throat as she watched the spectacle on the road from atop the building. Then suddenly, she pulled out her magical phone and attempted to make a call. But no one picked up. Bunny Ears's expression tensed even more, and she muttered, "Maybe the signal's no good" and "Maybe I should head straight to the emergency meetup point?" and so on as she moved over to the edge of the roof and tried to call again.

This is it, thought Weddin. Bunny Ears was clearly upset. She had her eye off Weddin, so if Weddin could just deal with the one issue here—the rope—she might be able to sneak away. With that thought, Weddin struggled, wriggled, and tried to talk to Ms. Himeno, passed out beside her, but nothing worked. Weddin just wasn't strong enough to loosen the rope.

She could feel the chill of the concrete seeping through her back all the way to her bones.

In this business, was strength everything, in the end? On the other side of the roof, Bunny Ears was still fighting with her phone. It seemed even a strong magical girl like her had her own struggles to deal with, too.

Softly, Weddin breathed a sigh.

"Weddin, Mei's tired," came a sudden voice.

Weddin almost yelped instinctively, but she bit her lip and managed to hold it in. Tepsekemei was looking down at her. She was floating, cross-legged.

Weddin spoke to her as quietly as she could. "Where have you been?"

"The enemy came, so Mei was fighting. She was strong."

"Did you defeat her?"

"Mei couldn't. She was too strong."

"So in other words, you ran away, huh? Well, that doesn't matter right now. More importantly, could you do something about this rope? I just can't undo it myself."

"Mei already cut it. Yours, and that lady's over there."

Weddin moved her hands. The rope fell gently. The cut clean, like the work of a very sharp blade. "Nice. Now I can run—"

"No." Tepsekemei wasn't looking at Weddin. Her attention was focused in a completely different direction. When Weddin turned her head to follow her gaze, her eyes locked with Bunny Ears's. Bunny Ears was looking at them with her magical phone in hand.

Weddin got up and jumped off the side of the building. She

could hear Bunny Ears's footsteps coming after her. They were terrifyingly fast—way faster than hers. This was no use. Weddin would have to either surrender again or fight together with Tepsekemei.

Tepsekemei was flying by Weddin's side. It seemed running wasn't yet a struggle for her. "You're slow, Weddin."

"We all have our individual differences!"

"You're slow, so Mei will help." As Weddin ran, Tepsekemei grabbed her collar and yanked her up, sweeping Weddin into her arms. "This is faster."

Tepsekemei sped up in a burst. But Bunny Ears, in pursuit, was just as fast. She lost no ground as she chased them. Tepsekemei went all over to try to get away somehow: the front of the farming cooperative storehouse, the parking lot of a big bookstore, the street behind the pachinko parlor. She even darted into narrow roads at sharp angles, but Bunny Ears still kept chasing.

"Can Mei fight?"

"Um… No fighting. Let's run." Before, Bunny Ears had fought evenly against multiple opponents, including Tepsekemei. Against just the two of them, Bunny Ears would be more than they could handle. And besides, they didn't even know how she'd defeated Kuru-Kuru Hime.

Tepsekemei didn't slow down, but neither did Bunny Ears.

"Get off the ground, Tepsekemei. If you fly, she won't be able to follow."

"Mei can't."

"Why not?"

"Because you're too heavy."

"Geez, rude!"

☆ Kuru-Kuru Hime (Time remaining: seventeen hours, twenty-one minutes)

She remembered everything until she'd passed out in front of Bunny Ears because of that mysterious sickness. That had been on the roof of the apartment building. When she came to again, she was lying on the roof of a completely different building, and Weddin and Bunny Ears were both gone. What's more, she wasn't Kuru-Kuru Hime but back as the human Nozomi Himeno, chilled to the core

and trembling under the cold sky.

I've got no idea what's going on, but I should run. Everything was terrifying.

Nozomi transformed into Kuru-Kuru Hime and started running. She didn't care where; she just had to get away. She sprang off the car parked on the road's shoulder and climbed up a telephone pole to the power line, then went up to the chamber of commerce building. From there, Kuru-Kuru Hime ran on top of the downtown arcade, took a running leap just barely short of the farming cooperative building. She flung out a ribbon to catch the edge, and from there, she slipped between combine harvesters and kicked aside weeds as she followed a beaten path through a farmer's field. She ended up racing through the forest, not caring if she was on an animal trail or a hiking path or no path at all, swinging between trees on her ribbons like Tarzan, until eventually, in the middle of the mountains, her face slammed into an invisible wall. She fell to the ground and rolled around, scattering dead leaves as she writhed in agony.

She was not only shocked by the impact. A sickening feeling like something had directly churned up her brain was running through her whole body. Her legs wouldn't move, her back felt weak, and she couldn't stand.

Now that she thought about it, she recalled Toko had told them that an invisible barrier surrounded the whole city. So this had to be the one. Kuru-Kuru Hime lay curled up for a while holding her nose, then picked up a leaf to wipe the blood from it. It was a good thing her legs had begun to weaken from the long run by the time she'd hit the barrier. She shuddered to think how much worse she could have been hurt if she'd collided with it when she'd been going at a dead sprint with full energy. Still, she shuddered again at the fact that she couldn't escape from this town.

She wove together her ribbons to make an impromptu seat with a sawtooth oak as its base and sat down on it, leaning back against the tree.

Bit by bit, the pounding of her heart and throbbing pain in her nose faded, as did her terror. Something was strange.

When she had been in magical-girl form, she hadn't questioned fighting. Moreover, with her mysterious magic and superhuman physical abilities, she'd tied up and twined her ribbons around her opponent like it was the natural thing to do. Returning to human

form for a moment had made it unbearably incomprehensible to her how she could have done such a thing. She had no idea what would have happened to her had she lost. The word “death” rose to her mind, and she clutched her trembling body in her arms.

She wasn’t just cold. She couldn’t stop shivering. There had been malice and desire to kill. There had been something raw and vivid that should not be in the lighthearted life of a magical girl.

She couldn’t even consider going back. The overwhelming violence had crushed her idealistic belief that a teacher should ensure all her students escaped before she was allowed to run herself. Despite what a deplorable state she knew she was in right then, she couldn’t move. She was frightened and scared and confused as to what was going on. After running this far, she was finally able to think carefully, but she still couldn’t bring herself to consider going back. *At least let them be safe*, she thought and tried calling Toko, Weddin, Captain Grace, Funny Trick, Tepsekemei, Rain Pow, and Postarie, one after another, but not a single one picked up. She sent them a message saying, *I’m safe, let’s meet up somewhere*, and returned her magical phone to her pocket.

—Calm down. Calm down. Calm down. Calm down.

She took out her magical phone one more time and checked the time. It was already late at night.

Some of the students might never return to their homes again. She clenched her jaw and squeezed her fists. Her ribbon chair was trembling.

She checked her messages. No replies from anyone.

The leaves on the trees rustled. Right now, Kuru-Kuru Hime was like cornered prey. A magical girl’s ears were sensitive enough to pick up even the smallest rustling of leaves—unlike Nozomi Himeno, who would carelessly fall asleep in the staff room directly beneath where the concert band practiced.

She rose slightly out of her seat and looked toward the source of the sound. She had anticipated that it would be nothing in the end, that she would smile at her own cowardice and sit down again, but her expectations were betrayed. In the shadow of the trees, there was a female ninja with one arm and one eye. The scarf covering her mouth fluttered in the wintry mountain wind, and her one open eye was gazing steadily at Kuru-Kuru Hime.

She was clearly a magical girl but not one Kuru-Kuru Hime knew. In other words, she was an ally of Bunny Ears’s.

Kuru-Kuru Hime put her ribbon chair away and began running, scattering tree leaves as she went, but before even one second, she hit the invisible wall again and tumbled to the ground. This time, she hit not just her nose, but her front teeth, too. Her brain felt ready to somersault.

Her nose, teeth, and lips hurt, but it wasn't the time for that. She held her face with her hand and used her elbow to lift herself up. Then, just as she was trying to somehow get herself off the ground, she froze. The ninja was right there. She was standing on Kuru-Kuru Hime's left side, looking down at her. Then she suddenly squatted, reaching out to take Kuru-Kuru Hime's arm. She pulled her to her feet and patted off the leaves stuck to her rear and back.

Still ready to bolt, and yet also unable to do so, Kuru-Kuru Hime just stood there. The ninja wasn't doing anything, necessarily, but she did keep hold of Kuru-Kuru Hime's arm, unwilling to let her go. Should she use her ribbons? But she really doubted she could beat the ninja in reflexes or speed. She felt like if she made any sort of move, she would get punched or thrown first.

Both of them remained silent, not budging at all as they looked at each other without backing away. Unable to take the silence, Kuru-Kuru Hime spoke first. "Um… How did you know where I was?"

"…I could see you running off, so I followed you." The ninja's scarf was hiding her mouth, muffling her words slightly, though her lovely voice still carried. But her tone, her way of talking, came out in dour, gloomy mumbles.

"Did you follow me?"

"…I did."

"Why?"

"…If I had called out to you, I wouldn't have known what to say," came the rather foolish reply. It didn't quite match up with her ninja image.

No, if her reply was foolish, then Kuru-Kuru Hime's question was just as foolish. Leaving aside whether this was a good time for questions at all, if this girl was going to answer, then Kuru-Kuru Hime had to ask what needed asking. "Why…did you people come here? Why are you trying to capture Toko?"

The ninja pulled in her chin, burying her face even deeper into her scarf, and her gaze turned to the roots of the sawtooth oak. Her mouth stayed closed, and her silence made Kuru-Kuru Hime think she'd asked a question that couldn't be answered. Apparently it wasn't that she didn't intend to reply, but rather that she was thinking. "We came…in order to…capture a criminal."

"A criminal? Are you people the police?"

"Some of them…are like police… I'm just helping."

"Helping?"

"I just came for an interview…but I got dragged into this…"

"If you were just dragged into this, you should have said no."

"If I say no, I can't get ahead in my career…"

She wanted to get ahead in her career? Kuru-Kuru Hime started to feel an affinity for this ninja. It was less out of sympathy and more thanks to the humanizing revelation that the ninja had such a worldly-minded desire. She was not a fully automated battle machine just expressionlessly swinging its sword and tossing shuriken.

The two of them continued their conversation, standing there awkwardly. Kuru-Kuru Hime learned that Ripple and her allies were trying to capture a murderer who was killing people connected to another world called the Magical Kingdom, and that Toko was connected to the murderer. Kuru-Kuru Hime also told Ripple frankly of her own situation.

She no longer worried how honest she should be with Ripple. She'd never been able to trust Toko, since she'd made the students her hostages; she felt an affinity with Ripple; and most of all, waiting here would just leave her in a deadlock. Ripple listened to her wish to have her students escape somewhere safe, then shook her hand as they stood there in those unnatural positions. Ripple's chilly palm felt nice.

☆ **Postarie (Time remaining: seventeen hours, twenty-six**

minutes)

Postarie made a call to Weddin, then to Captain Grace, Funny Trick, and Tepsekemei, but she couldn't get through to any of them. It wasn't just that they weren't picking up. There was this unpleasant, grating interference almost like a scratching sound, and she couldn't even hear the call. It wasn't just Postarie's magical phone having this problem. The call functions on Rain Pow's phone weren't working anymore, either. When she tried dialing her home phone number to test, the same thing happened. She couldn't make calls anymore, to any kind of device.

When they tried asking Toko what was going on, all she had to say was, "No clue." The fairy had been quite useless for a while now.

After getting rid of that black thing, they left that area for the time being, making sure that nobody was chasing them. Relief and fear welled up simultaneously inside her, and Postarie slumped down on the spot.

An enemy attack, a shuriken-throwing ninja, their flight across the rainbow bridge, their trip clinging to the station wagon as it flew through the air—all of those had been fairly scary experiences, but the encounter with that black thing to top it off had sent Postarie's heart well past the breaking point. She cried for a while on the ground on all fours, but Rain Pow rubbing her back somehow relaxed her. She was so grateful for the warmth of Rain Pow's palms on her back, she wanted to cling to them.

With the concrete-block wall at their backs, Postarie and Rain Pow sat side by side, and Toko, who had retreated into Rain Pow's shirt, also joined them to talk about what had just happened. They came to no conclusions. Though they understood that the enemy had come to them, neither Postarie nor Rain Pow knew what the heck it was. They'd never really understood what sort of being it was in the first place.

What was important to Postarie was that they never get involved in this matter ever again, and she would have no regrets if doing that required quitting being a magical girl. Not so for Rain Pow. She insisted that she wanted to resolve this, and in doing so, make her powers permanent. Of course, Toko also supported her endeavor.

"I mean, it'd be a waste. We're so strong and cool now, with

mysterious powers…and we're magical girls! You'd never get to be something like this living a normal life."

"Yeah, yeah! That's right. I like the cut of your jib."

Postarie understood that Rain Pow didn't want to let go of these mysterious powers. But Postarie would rather stay alive.

Even if they were stronger than humans, ultimately, it was a relative thing. It had been proven by this point that Postarie's powers were not that great relative to other magical girls. So it was better to live her ordinary life as a normal human being, just as she always had, rather than get some semi-superpower and fight with dangerous opponents. It wasn't as if she had been at all unhappy with her life thus far.

But still, it wasn't as if Postarie had any great ideas as to how to get out of their current situation, either.

Postarie had the feeling that even if they tried to find someone to save them, the enemies they faced right now would be able to hold their ground against not only the police but even the Japan Self-Defense Forces armed to the teeth with tanks or planes.

Rain Pow not only told her that they couldn't rely on the police; she also disapproved of revealing their identities. She protested that she wanted to continue being a magical girl, talked about how so many things would go to waste if they were found out. So she refused any intervention from society. Of course, Toko also endorsed that argument.

"C'mon, Tsuko. Let's do it! We can't give up now!"

"That's right! There's no way I'm letting you give up halfway! No way!" Adding Toko to the conversation meant they ended up circling the same place, in the end.

Postarie mainly spoke to Rain Pow. They let Toko talk all she wanted, too, but Postarie wasn't actually listening to her.

Postarie and Rain Pow's discussion was close to a quarrel. It didn't seem there could be any compromise between their views, and no matter how they tried to argue their points, neither ever got through to the other. Plus, it wasn't as if either girl had any firm plans for a solution. Though this was ostensibly a conversation, it was their first fight since they had become friends. To Postarie, Rain Pow was just coming off as reckless and crazy. Postarie wondered if maybe she should just abandon her, say "Do what you want!" and plan her escape alone. But all she did was wonder. She couldn't bring herself to actually do it. When Postarie tried to run away, she

couldn't shake off the memories of Kaori's ever-changing expressions, the sound of her joyful laughter, the first time they'd gone to an arcade together, the warmth of Kaori's palms rubbing against her back, and more.

Until Kaori had become her best friend, Postarie—Tatsuko—didn't have a single person she could call a friend for her whole ten-odd years. She'd always wanted a friend as much as anyone did, but once she made one, for the first time, she understood. This was like a curse.

Postarie's shoulders drooped. It was hard for her to accept how aggressive Rain Pow was acting, but she couldn't leave her, either.

Something was happening—but they didn't know what. Since the three of them were isolated without help, unable to contact anyone, they decided to follow Rain Pow's suggestion and try going back to the apartment building next. Of course, they were not returning as magical girls. They would undo their transformations and go back as humans. Then they would check out what had happened one more time. Police cars, ambulances, and fire trucks would probably be there by now. The local newspaper and maybe national online mass media would have come. There was bound to be a crowd, and it had to be big. This was a small town with little entertainment, incidents, or accidents; if something happened, even this late at night, people would join the throng just because it was there. Once there was a crowd, they could slip in among them. As long as they didn't transform into magical girls, the enemy should not be able to identify Postarie's and Rain Pow's faces.

If one of their allies had been captured and was being tortured into revealing the identities of their allies, including Postarie's and Rain Pow's, then they might get caught. But if that had happened, then they were going to get caught soon enough anyway.

These unproductive, pessimistic fantasies were bad for her stomach and heart. The physical heart of a human was not as sturdily made as that of a magical girl. This was surely also true for the human spirit.

The three of them were now headed for the road where the station wagon had fallen. As they had anticipated, the road was now closed. A big crowd surrounded it, and police cars were parked nearby. They detoured around the road, wearing expressions that said, *"We're just harmless middle schoolers passing by."*

The crowd at the apartment building was even bigger. There

were a lot of police cars, an ambulance, and even a fire truck. The wail of sirens echoed all around, and their red lights repeatedly asserted themselves in the darkness of the night. They were joined by plenty of rubberneckers, too. Some were wearing pajamas, and some weren't.

There was also a collection of media people with cameras and microphones. The area was blocked off with tape, keeping out everyone but the police, so they couldn't see what it was like on the inside.

An old man in a down jacket with a mike pointed at him was spraying spittle as he raved: "A car flew through the air! I swear I saw it! There's no way I was imagining things!"

Rumors from the crowd reached their ears. It seemed other people had witnessed a flying car, too. There had been a rainbow, even though it was nighttime. A boat, too, for some reason. And someone had fired a rocket launcher. No, it wasn't a rocket launcher—it was a cannon. A mysterious group of cosplayers had started a loud brawl on the road nearby, and maybe this was connected to that. But it seemed nobody had been caught yet. What was going on here, causing such a big commotion?

Tatsuko looked at Kaori, who stared back. Her eyelashes were trembling slightly, her eyes moist, and her whole face was pale, even her lips.

Nobody had been captured. In other words, no one was left here. But they couldn't get ahold of them. So then where did they all go? Horrible thoughts floated up in Tatsuko's mind, then receded.

Aware that both of them looked awful, she tugged her knit cap down low over her eyes, pulled together the collar of her coat, and wrapped her scarf around her neck tight. Kaori's shoulder bumped someone in the crowd, and a middle-aged man who looked like a factory worker spat at them. "Watch it!"

Tatsuko tugged Kaori's sleeve and pulled her out of the crowd. "It'll be okay… The other kids and Ms. Himeno and Mei are all strong," Tatsuko said quietly, as if trying to console herself. "They're just hiding somewhere right now."

She was so transparent. Even she didn't think they were just hiding.

She took Kaori's hand, and they left the scene. The two of them sat side by side on a bench at a nearby children's park and gazed up

at the sky. The clouds were thick and black and went on forever. It didn't look as if it was going to clear up.

They were the only people in the park. Illuminated by the streetlights, the promenade was missing many bricks, and the playground was rusted and creaking in the blowing wind. This town was the same everywhere. A sigh slipped from her. There was nowhere to go.

"Are you magical girls?" someone suddenly called out to them.

As Tatsuko was processing that in her mind, she panicked and looked back, tripping over her feet. As she started to fall, she grabbed the back of the bench and somehow managed to catch her balance.

A magical girl was standing at the park entrance. Her long dress coat, middling-length khaki scarf, Panama hat, and big sunglasses all looked suspicious. For a magical-girl costume, it was mismatched overall and lacking in style, but there was no mistaking her face and aura. Most importantly, she was using the term "magical girl."

Kaori gave Tatsuko a sidelong glance as she went on guard, facing the magical girl. She appeared extremely cautious.

The magical girl's eyebrows tilted up, and one of her cheeks rose. As Tatsuko thought about what that expression meant, she heard the magical girl sigh, and Tatsuko realized she was disappointed.

"What are you doing?" The newcomer approached them readily, casually raised her hand, and slapped Kaori's and Tatsuko's cheeks. It wasn't the sort of attack that would send them flying—nor enough to even call it an attack in the first place. But still, Tatsuko's cheek stung, and she cradled it as she looked back at the magical girl, dumbfounded.

"You two aren't transformed right now. I'd like to yell at you and demand why the hell you're on the battlefield out of costume in the first place, but no matter. There are times when you're forced to go human for covert missions and such. But that aside." This time, she slapped their other cheeks. She hadn't even given them enough time for the heat from the first strike to fade, and now both cheeks stung. "What do you think you're doing, going on guard when someone asks if you're magical girls? Huh? You might as well be publicizing your identity. How can you let the enemy know you're a magical girl when they're already transformed and you're not?

You're never going to survive on the battlefield if you do things like that. You'll be squashed like insects."

The magical girl stared closely at them. She wasn't really glaring, but her gaze wasn't friendly, either. Unable to determine what the look was, Tatsuko smiled mildly at her, and this time, the magical girl brought her fist down on Tatsuko's head so hard she saw stars.

"What are you doing?!"

"Are you in the position to be complaining?!" The magical girl crushed Kaori's brave resistance with a double slap. Seeing Kaori collapse onto the bench, Tatsuko firmly closed her mouth. "Attention!" the girl ordered, and Tatsuko snapped her back straight. The girl turned her gaze to Tatsuko, then next looked at Kaori, who lay on the bench with her shoulders trembling, and kicked up at Kaori's thigh. "Why are you lying there?! If you're told *attention*, then stand, at least!"

Tatsuko would absolutely never say, *"But aren't you the one who knocked her down?"* The magical girl dragged Kaori to her feet, where she stood on the verge of tears. Tatsuko had no intention of protesting.

The suspicious-looking newcomer raved about just how dangerous it was to face a magical girl when in human form. It seemed she wasn't going to kill them or anything, but she could slap them again at any time, and Tatsuko couldn't quell her anxiety.

Toko remained safely silent within Rain Pow's clothing. It seemed she was pretending she wasn't there. That was probably the right choice.

"The person approaching you was transformed. You were not. In this situation, if someone asks if you're a magical girl, then play dumb. Treat them like a freak. Say, *'What the hell are you talking about?'* I don't know how well that will work, but it's far better than doing something so *suicidal* as openly bracing for a fight when you're in human form. And though it's out of the question to go on guard as a human, don't even think about transforming there to fight back, either. Do you know how long it takes for a human to think about transforming and then to carry that out? With the reflexes of a magical girl, I could kill you a hundred times, or a thousand. Do you understand now that transforming in front of another magical girl is foolish? If you have, then transform."

Tatsuko was considering what she had just been told when her

cheek was slapped again. Tears leaked from her eyes.

"Transform! Do what you're told immediately!"

Tatsuko panicked and transformed, and her cheek was slapped again.

"Were you not listening to me when I told you not to transform?!"

"U-um, but—but we went on guard already, so you already know, and there's no point in playing dumb, right?"

"Don't talk back!"

Rain Pow was knocked down onto the bench again. Even as Postarie wondered why her friend hadn't learned, she hated herself for how quickly she was getting used to this unreasonable treatment. The magical girl stared at Postarie and Rain Pow appraisingly. Finally, she snorted. It seemed like she didn't think much of them, and that made Postarie vaguely angry. Of course, she didn't let that show on her face.

"Not like I didn't know already, but you're amateurs. Students at the local middle school?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"You've only just been made magical girls by Toko."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Did Toko trick you?"

Postarie was unable to respond to that immediately. She couldn't recall ever being deceived. Some things had been vaguely suspicious, but she couldn't say for sure. She looked over at Rain Pow's chest, but there was no reaction from Toko.

In response to Postarie's apparent hesitation, the magical girl snorted once again, pulled out her magical phone to push a button, and put the phone to her ear. Then she scowled. "It won't connect."

"Um… We haven't been able to get through for a while now, either."

Her reply was a slap. The magical girl muttered, "Now I can't contact the team chief," and then she turned back to Postarie and Rain Pow. "I am Archfiend Pam. I'm a member of the inspection team that's infiltrated this town in order to arrest the assassin hiding here. So you two girls opposed us because you were deceived by her accomplice, Toko… What are your names?"

"Postarie."

"I'm Rain Pow."

"Postarie and Rain Pow. I'll give you one chance. If you

cooperate with us, we won't inquire into the crimes you've committed thus far. I would have preferred to inquire with the team chief before doing this if possible, but I can't get through, so there's no helping that. I guarantee this, on my honor, so you don't need to worry."

As Postarie was desperately sorting out this information, wondering just what this all meant, another slap flew toward her.

"How do you answer?!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

"Y-yes, ma'am!"

"All right. Good answers, for amateurs. So then starting now—" Archfiend Pam suddenly glanced away to look at the park entrance. Postarie's and Rain Pow's eyes were also drawn to the same spot. A little girl in her pajamas was staring at the three magical girls. Archfiend Pam's relentless and tight expression suddenly relaxed, and she waved at the child. "Sorry! We'll get out of the way soon!" Her gentle smile and carefree manner of speech made her seem like a completely different person from before.

Postarie gave her a look that said, *"What's with you?"* But when Archfiend Pam turned back again, she panicked and looked away.

"What is so funny?!"

Rain Pow had apparently smiled, so Archfiend Pam hit her again. It hurt about the same transformed as it had in human form, which had to mean she was good at holding back.

—What is with this lady…?

☆ Captain Grace (Time remaining: seventeen hours, fifty-nine minutes)

When the hammers she'd given to Postarie to hold on to flew toward her, she knew that they were fighting the enemy, too. *I've gotta go save them*, Captain Grace thought eagerly, running toward where the hammers had come from.

She and Funny Trick dashed over the downtown arcade, moving from the roof of the credit union to a residential area, to stop on the roof of an old house. They encountered no allies or enemies. Captain Grace pulled out her magical phone, confirmed once more that it was useless, then tossed it away. It rolled down the corrugated roof to come to a halt in the gutter.

She couldn't get ahold of anyone. She couldn't use her magical phone anymore. What use was it if it was broken? They didn't have the technology to repair it here, either.

Funny Trick picked up the magical phone Grace had thrown. "Listen, if our magical phones aren't working, then why don't we use our normal phones?"

"Kayo, d'you even know everyone's numbers?"

"Well… Then we could check and see how things are going at their homes or something."

"I dunno their addresses. Do you?"

"…No, I don't."

The apartment building was bustling with rubberneckers and police. Most likely, neither their enemies nor their allies would return there. The two of them tried going to the school, too, but all that did was remind them that the school at night was a lonely place.

"We should've decided on a meeting spot for times like these."

"If that idiot Weddin wanted to play leader, she should've done that stuff right, at least."

Defeating that black thing had been truly exhilarating. Everything after had been lacking in excitement. Searching and searching unsuccessfully for the allies who'd been fighting with them only made her frustrated.

"What do we do…?" Funny Trick sank down on the peak of the roof.

Captain Grace hated seeing her in such a state. "Don't give me that! We've just gotta meet up with someone. It doesn't matter who."

"It doesn't matter who, huh? …But it'd be nice to find someone reliable, if possible. If we meet up with Toko, she might be able to explain what's going on."

This was the reason Captain Grace was getting so irritated. Funny Trick was uneasy. She was scared, frightened, and trembling in cowardice, even though her partner, the one she should rely on the most, was right there with her.

Captain Grace was different. Captain Grace, the great pirate who had sailed the seven seas, who was also a magical girl who wielded mysterious magic, would always bravely continue to fight. That was true even now. Even as they searched for allies, she was simultaneously seeking out enemies. She was going to find an

enemy as strong or stronger than that black thing and take them out. Speaking of which, she wanted another fight with Bunny Ears. Now that she had leveled up with one do-or-die fight as a magical girl under her belt, she wouldn't let Bunny Ears get away again.

"C'mon, we're not resting forever. Next, we're gonna go look around the Teramachi area." Captain Grace grabbed Funny Trick's arm and hoisted her up.

☆ 7753 (Time remaining: fifteen hours, fifty-two minutes)

The magical girl with the ribbons introduced herself as Kuru-Kuru Hime. She said she was a teacher at the local middle school and explained that Toko had made her and a number of her students into magical girls. She hadn't liked the idea of sending her students out into danger, but Toko had said her memories would be erased if she opposed the plan, so she had obeyed. She seemed to be blaming herself more than making excuses.

As 7753 listened to Kuru-Kuru Hime's story, words were continuously displayed in her goggles, instructing 7753 how to prompt her: *Absolutely do not blame her; put your hand on her shoulder; discreetly check Ripple's and Mana's expressions; turn the discussion toward Mana*, etc. 7753 obeyed every one of these minute instructions, but then halfway through, it suddenly cut off.

It can't be—it's not just the magical phones? Even the goggles are broken? Perhaps it was one of her boss's reckless modifications. It was a convincing enough theory to scare her. But while she was getting worked up, a new message appeared. Her relief that the goggles weren't broken lasted only a brief instant as her heart was cast into a yet deeper ocean of distress.

Some serious criminals had escaped from magical-girl prison to infiltrate B City for some reason. These escapees, led by Pythie Frederica, would of course have some kind of goal in mind, and though 7753's boss didn't know if that target was the assassin or the inspection team or something else, it was certain that the situation in B City had grown even more dangerous. Military personnel among the upper ranks of the Magical Kingdom felt the gravity of the current situation and emphasized that they must take out Frederica's party before the barrier erected by the Department of

Diplomacy wore off, no matter what it took. Depending on the situation, they might not even be able to avoid injuring innocent bystanders.

7753 had never heard the name Pythie Frederica before. The message from her boss continued to stream across her goggles.

Pythie Frederica had previously been a scout for magical girls. Though she had not been directly involved with Musician of the Forest, Cranberry, she'd been heavily influenced by her and had deviated from her proper role; she had been arrested under suspicion of having made magical-girl candidates kill one another, then been imprisoned. It was thought that Frederica had gained knowledge of the dark side of the Magical Kingdom by using her magic, which allowed her to observe things from a distance. It was also rumored that it may have been the reason she had been sentenced to the ultimate punishment of being sealed away.

7753 didn't really understand this, but what she did get was that some frightening magical girls had been unleashed in the world. This was clearly not information that she could keep to herself. But still, if she were asked how she had gotten this information, she would be unable to reply.

The message from her boss continued.

I'm aware that your magical phones are broken, but the cause is unknown. It's believed the prison escapees are using some method to interfere with them. Share this information with the others and tell them, "I received an e-mail from my boss before my magical phone broke, but I only just noticed it now."

Oh, so I could do it like that.

7753 told the others that she was going to try a little more to see if she could get her magical phone to work and left the circle where the rest of them were discussing. She pulled out her phone, created a suitable fake e-mail, and gave a deliberate yelp of surprise. "Oh! I had an e-mail!" Praying, *Please let them not find out*, she told them all the information she'd gotten from her boss.

Her expression serious, Mana rubbed her eyes, which were red

and swollen from crying, and bit her lip.

Ripple looked worried and muttered, “It’s her…”

That made Mana suspicious, and she turned over to Ripple. “What? Someone you know?” Ripple nodded, and Mana exploded. “What the hell’s going on?!”

“Frederica…”

Mana grabbed Ripple by the collar and shoved her. Ripple’s back hit the iron fence, making red rust sprinkle down from it. “You’re friends with an escaped criminal?!”

Ripple patted off the dirt from her back. “…Someone me and my friend captured,” she finished.

Mana tried to press even closer to Ripple, but 7753 stopped her. If she let Mana do this on the edge of the roof, one of them was going to fall. “Mana, please calm down. She’s more of an enemy than an acquaintance, right?”

“Shut up! And you! You captured Frederica, didn’t you? Then capture her this time, too! With Hana on your side, you can do it easy, can’t you?!”

Holding Mana’s hands behind her back, 7753 peeled her off Ripple. Kuru-Kuru Hime looked frightened as she watched. *Well, of course she’s frightened*, thought 7753. Ripple, under attack, also had her eyes on the ground. 7753 felt sorry for her, too. Mana was worried about Hana right now, which had gotten her so worked up she was having trouble leading. She was so mentally off balance that 7753 wouldn’t be surprised if she tried to get them all to do something reckless.

Just like with magical girls, you couldn’t tell the age of a mage based on appearance alone. She might actually be the age that she looked. 7753 felt bad for her, but she couldn’t allow her to force them all into a suicide mission. Seeing Mana’s tearful rage, she also thought, *I can’t let this girl kill anyone*.

And then another message appeared in her goggles.

Frederica has brought out two vicious criminals who were arrested one hundred and thirty years ago.

The one in patchwork rags is Sonia Bean. The fencer is Pukin. These magical girls ran rampant through England a hundred and thirty years ago, until they were sealed away in the same prison as Frederica. Adding their body counts together would total more than a thousand victims, and they went down in history as the worst

criminals the Magical Kingdom had ever seen. Their combat abilities were top class, even compared to modern magical girls, and Sonia's ability to crumble whatever she touched was an indomitable fortress that operated as both defense and offense, while Pukin's magic sword, which could give delusions to anyone it cut, enabled some extremely high-level mental manipulation.

7753 repeated this information verbatim as it flowed into her goggles. As she explained, she despaired. They seemed like unbeatable opponents.

"And Tot Pop, Frederica's student… Even within the revolutionary faction, she's known as a militant. It's believed that these are the four who have entered the city."

"How could they get in?! The barrier still hasn't been broken!"

"With Frederica's magic, if the conditions are fulfilled, she could ignore the barrier…right?"

Ripple nodded deeply, and 7753 followed the message in the goggles. "The problem is who to prioritize: Frederica's party or the assassin."

Kuru-Kuru Hime gave a very deep nod, and 7753 continued following her goggles' message. "Letting Frederica's group run free would allow the worse harm than the assassin would do. We have to catch them quickly. We should prioritize them over the assassin."

"Bullshit! So then what would you have us do?!"

"We have to meet up with Hana somehow. She doesn't know the escaped prisoners have been unleashed in the city. She's in danger."

"Hana is… Shit!" Mana shut her mouth. The way she was glaring at the ground, it seemed less that she had calmed down and more that she was holding in her anger.

7753 continued reading the message from her boss. "And Archfiend Pam, too. With Archfiend Pam, the Department of Diplomacy's ultimate weapon, we can face them… Huh?" 7753 hesitated, then looked at Ripple, whose eyes were still on the ground, and continued. "With Archfiend Pam, who was a teacher to Musician of the Forest, Cranberry." She knew that Ripple had lifted her head. She could feel her intense gaze. "I'm sure we'll be able to stand against Frederica's group of four."

Mana lifted her jaw and opened her lips to say something, still gritting her teeth, then blew out only air.

7753 continued reading the words before her. “The reason we were saving Archfiend Pam’s strength was because we were afraid of killing the criminal. If we’re using her not to arrest the culprit but instead to suppress Frederica, then there’s no problem—at the very least, as long as she causes no damage to the area.”

Mana closed her eyes. The streaks of her tears were not yet dry. 7753 gingerly let go of Mana’s arm, and Kuru-Kuru Hime heaved a deep sigh. Mana didn’t stir at all, nor did anyone else for a few minutes more, and right when 7753 was thinking that she had to do something, Mana pulled out her staff. “First, we look for Hana. Once we’ve found her, we go for Archfiend Pam.”

Now they might finally manage to break out of this situation. 7753 was thankful to her boss for sending her all that information.

☆ **Archfiend Pam (Time remaining: sixteen hours, thirty-five minutes)**

The two magical girls she had caught in the park were total amateurs, but they didn’t appear to be villains to the core. They weren’t targets to be fought but kids she should be safeguarding.

Archfiend Pam was not in the position to be laughing and calling others amateurs, either. She’d been doing nothing but make mistakes ever since she’d come to this town. She was unquestionably an amateur when it came to investigation.

Although Archfiend Pam was attached to the Department of Diplomacy, she wasn’t very fond of their methods. They had deployed a combat specialist as external help so they could control the scene with force. They hadn’t changed one bit since Pam had first become a magical girl.

The way the special inspection team saw it, it must seem like clear, unnecessary meddling from outside forces. And as field staff, this job was not a joy to her. She’d had some interest in this assassin—not out of a sense of justice or ethics, but rather because she was very curious about the assassin’s strength.

Having worked a long time as a magical girl, Archfiend Pam knew herself better than anyone. Her interest in strong magical girls was a problem because, even being aware of it, she couldn’t quite keep it under control. She hadn’t changed one bit since she was a

newbie, not even now that she could call herself a veteran.

When the incident with Cranberry had been exposed, all she had thought was *Oh, I see*. Archfiend Pam had understood how Cranberry must have felt. She must have just wanted to fight strong magical girls so much. Her arguments about reform, like that the conventional exams were too lenient, were just a pretense. The true nature of the problem was elsewhere.

Cranberry was slave to nothing and so had taken extremes, while Archfiend Pam was bound by ethics and emotions and unable to do such things. That was the only difference between them.

And although Archfiend Pam had the same desires as Cranberry, crushing the weak underfoot felt loathsome to her. Many of the examinees Cranberry had crushed had to have been such weaklings. That was another thing that made them incompatible.

Though Pam had told no one of these complicated feelings, being the teacher who had given Cranberry the title of Musician of the Forest made her position within the organization unstable—although it was quite a long time ago that she had been Cranberry's teacher, and in fact, she did not end up being demoted. As a result, while she was a veteran with a degree of status, as a difficult magical girl to deal with, she was made to fight on the front lines.

She had felt remorse about the incident, but even so, she didn't feel as if she had educated Cranberry any differently. Those who chose to go out and fight were all playmates. Whether they killed or were killed, there were no regrets, and any sadness was fleeting. The same had been true for Cranberry, too. She had been a playmate. That was an undeniable fact. The problem with Cranberry was that she had dragged those who were not playmates into her games. Archfiend Pam didn't feel something like that could be any fun.

Archfiend Pam reflected on herself. If she'd been in the same position as Cranberry, would she have done the same thing? Probably not. But she couldn't say that with any certainty.

That was why Archfiend Pam did not resist orders from above. If she were to act on her own judgment, she might go wild. The ones who stood above her would surely direct her better than she would direct herself. She obeyed mechanically and blindly, never thinking for herself. She would become equipment. Every time she remembered Cranberry, she was deeply reminded of the necessity of this.

It was the same with this job, too. She obeyed her superiors' orders. Even if she could see through the official instructions to their hidden intentions, she pretended not to. She would not deliberate over political machinations or the pulling of strings. Even if she meant to act intelligently, that might not necessarily lead to good results.

The dancing girl she had fought with in the sky when they had attacked the apartment building had ultimately gotten away from her.

Pam had completely forgotten the barrier up high in the sky. Once she got the chance to start fighting a strong enemy, she dropped everything else to focus only on the battlefield. That was exactly what had enabled her to survive this long, but with a mission of this sort, that habit was more problematic.

Chasing her opponent, she'd cut through a thick cloud, and when she'd emerged from its top, she'd remembered. She couldn't see it, but when something might cause her harm, she would feel its presence. She immediately sensed the barrier wall and came to an abrupt stop. Flustered, she looked around, but the dancing girl was gone. She might have hit the barrier and fallen to the ground. Pam continued to search the area for a while but never found her. So then she recalled her job and flew back down to the world below.

Alighting on the ground, Archfiend Pam called all her wings back. For some reason, one of them had sprouted white bird wings and returned to her at intense speed. It seemed some sort of magic had been used on it. Another wing didn't return, apparently destroyed. There had to be a fairly powerful enemy on this battlefield, capable of taking out one of Archfiend Pam's wings. Just thinking about that made her heart jump with glee.

Calming the excitement welling up in her heart, she split one of her wings in half to return the number of her wings to four. Four was simply the upper limit for her number of wings, and it wasn't as if the missing wing wouldn't come back. Archfiend Pam's wings could be manipulated in absolutely every way she wanted.

Pam gave each of her wings the ability to see and hear and conferred them with simple intelligence, enabling them to act on their own. She ordered them, "Once you find those who seem to be enemies, inform me. If they attack you, I give you permission to attack."

This was the battlefield, and carelessness would lead to a swift death. She transformed one of her wings into a black dress coat and wrapped it around her body, then headed to the apartment building where the enemy seemed to be staying, remaining alert to her surroundings as she went. She wanted to check on things there before she headed to their emergency meeting spot.

It was right around then that she discovered the two magical girls. The apartment building was swarmed with reporters, news staff, and rubberneckers making a commotion, but among all this, two girls whose movements seemed unnatural caught Pam's eye. With restless eyes, they checked inside the apartment building, but their ears were perked up to listen to every voice around them. The fact that both of them were wearing school uniforms also made them stick out from their surroundings. Most of all, they had the air that all detransformed magical girls shared. After some hesitation, Archfiend Pam came down to the ground.

Archfiend Pam meant to safeguard the two magical girls, but the pair themselves had most likely gotten a different impression. Pam was angry—not at them but at Toko for just turning them into magical girls with hardly any training at all and then tossing them out onto the battlefield. Toko had simply made some throwaway pawns for the sake of her own escape. Just what did she take magical girls to be?

When Archfiend Pam had been working in the special teaching corps, things had been different. Newbies, be they good or bad, had been treated carefully and with affection. Recalling her time in service, Archfiend Pam informed the two about the rules of magical girls. Raising her voice, slapping their cheeks, she taught them kindly, carefully, and thoroughly what a sitting duck a detransformed magical girl was and just how dangerous what they were doing was.

Looking at the two of them respectfully standing in front of her, they didn't seem at all like the enemies her allies had just been fighting. They were frozen stiff. They looked scared. When she asked them some questions, they answered honestly.

Eventually, she figured she had to contact the investigation team chief now, so she tried calling with her magical phone, but she got nothing but grating static and couldn't get through.

—*Something is happening.*

It would be dangerous for the newbies to undo their transformations right now. It seemed something unexpected was going on, but being away from the center of the situation, Archfiend Pam had not quite figured out what it was. But still, if she dragged around these two while they were transformed, they would be hopelessly obvious.

"There's no helping it… *Sabbath.*" Archfiend Pam transformed two of her wings into coats. She changed their color to brown, gave them the texture of cloth, and also added buttons and hoods and such. "Wear these while you're out. Pull the hood down over your eyes."

Having them wear these coats made from her wings meant they wouldn't stand out so much, at a glance. And if the time came to fight, she could use the wings to protect the two girls. She didn't want to involve children in a battle, but abandoning them here would be a lot more dangerous than imprudently dragging them into this mess.

Rain Pow looked at the coat suspiciously and hesitated to put it on, so Archfiend Pam slapped her cheek. Now they would be able to get moving—for now. Her current goal was to meet up with the inspection team.

She reproved Rain Pow for a comment to Postarie ("Who the heck is this lady?") with another slap to the cheek, and after warning them to stay on guard, she began walking.

As they walked, she asked them questions. The two of them had been told that the inspection team were "evil mages" and had apparently fought with them. It seemed they were being used by Toko, after all. Their group had attacked the inspection team on the street and had been attacked in turn at the apartment building. The two of them had withdrawn for the time being but then returned to the apartment building to check on what was happening, and that was when Archfiend Pam had caught them.

Archfiend Pam still didn't know if Hana and Ripple were safe, and she still didn't know why she couldn't get ahold of the team chief, in the end. The girls told her their magical phones weren't working now, either. Rain Pow suggested, "Maybe they all broke at once on coincidence…" and so Archfiend Pam punched her.

☆ **Weddin (Time remaining: sixteen hours, forty-one minutes)**

They just ran. They ran and ran and kept on running. But they couldn't escape.

"Can't you go any faster?!"

"Mei can't. Weddin is heavy."

"You don't have to keep saying that!"

They traversed sudden curves, winding mountain roads, and complex intersections. Tepsekemei knocked over a bucket that had been sitting behind a ramen shop, scattering the contents, and blew away a pachinko parlor banner as they shot past. But Bunny Ears still stayed hot on their heels.

Outrunning her seemed unlikely. When Weddin lifted her head to look behind them, she saw Bunny Ears's expression was still calm and her pace was steady. She didn't seem out of breath, either.

So if they couldn't rely on endurance, and they weren't fast enough to break away from her, then what should they do?

"Oh, I know!"

"What is it, Weddin?"

"You're flying, right, Tepsekemei?"

"Yeah. Mei is flying."

Tepsekemei had said she couldn't fly any higher because Weddin was too heavy, but she could still manage to float about four inches above the ground. She was sliding along at that height.

"Then you should head toward the port."

"Why?"

"You should go onto the ocean."

"What's the ocean?"

"I even have to teach you that? Um, how should I put it now…? It's a big puddle beyond a place called a port."

"Why would we go there?"

"You can float on top of the water, but she can't walk on it, so she'd have to swim. I doubt that rabbit can swim as fast as she can run. If that were possible, the Hare of Inaba would never have been skinned." *That's a good idea, if I do say so myself*, Weddin mentally complimented herself.

But Tepsekemei shook her head. "Mei can't."

"Why not?"

"Earlier, Mei flew up very, very high, touched it, and fell."

"You what?"

"This place is all wrapped up now. We can't get outside. So we can't go to the ocean beyond."

“Wrapped up?”

“It hurts a lot when you touch it. Mei won’t touch it again.”

Oh. Now Weddin recalled how Toko had told them B City was encircled by a barrier. So in other words, their game of tag was restricted to this city only. They couldn’t run out to sea.

So then what about a river? A large river flowing through the city…didn’t exist. Though it was cloudy, it didn’t rain much, and the last time she’d heard talk of rising water flooding rivers was summer of last year.

So what should they do? They were boxed in. Bunny Ears had easily knocked Kuru-Kuru Hime unconscious using something they didn’t understand…probably magic. Even though Bunny Ears had been completely restrained, too. Weddin knew Tepsekemei was strong. If they were to fight, she couldn’t say there was absolutely no chance of victory. But could they win when they didn’t even understand how the enemy attacked?

Should she make Tepsekemei stop so they could negotiate? But their trust levels were at rock bottom. Bunny Ears had said it herself: *“I won’t listen to what you say anymore.”* No matter how she wheedled—no, it was certain that any talking would make Bunny Ears more likely to ignore her.

“Hey.”

The voice that addressed her was unexpectedly close, startling her. Weddin craned her neck around to confirm the identity of the magical girl diagonally behind her. “Captain Grace!”

“Geez, guys! You gotta make it easier to find you when you’re runnin’ around!” The pirate-style magical girl grinned boldly. Funny Trick was behind her. Tepsekemei was with them, too.

“Huh? Tepsekemei? Why? Huh?”

“Mei sent out five other selves. And made them look for the others.”

With a hissing sound, the Tepsekemei behind Funny Trick shrank, then disappeared. Now that Weddin thought of it, Tepsekemei could create copies of herself. She’d said they couldn’t move as freely as her main body, and they could only be used as messengers, but yes, they were definitely useful.

“Wait, if you could do something like that, you should’ve had them fly the other way to buy us time!”

“You said not to fight.”

Tepsekemei gradually slowed, and Captain Grace and Funny

Trick matched her, until they all stopped in front of an abandoned factory that had shut down after the economic bubble burst. In this town, which was in decline overall, this region was the most desolate. The streetlights were broken and abandoned without any repair.

"So we finally meet. I'm not letting you get away again." Captain Grace unsheathed her cutlass and pointed it at their enemy.

With the blade pointed at her, Bunny Ears smiled wryly and went into a fighting stance. "Oh, dear. Fighting four at once. I'd like to give my team chief a call, though."

"Four at once? What a sad thing to say. Just me'll be enough."

"Hey! Umi! That's dangerous!" Funny Trick practically shrieked.

Weddin nodded, too. "She's too much for you to try to fight solo just so you can look cool. She knocked out Kuru-Kuru Hime using some method I couldn't even understand. We should all fight her together."

"Whoa, Kuru-Kuru Hime, huh. So is she still alive?"

"Yes, she was breathing but unconscious."

"Well, that's good. Then let's fight one-on-one."

Funny Trick's shoulders drooped, and Weddin sighed as Tepsekemei let her down. Captain Grace's brain was made of muscle and magic.

"Ohhh, well I'm quite grateful you say that." Bunny Ears's strained smile turned into a lighter one, and Captain Grace grinned broadly.

"Nobody interfere. I'm gonna finish this good, so you just—"

The trash pile in front of the factory shook and moaned. Weddin furrowed her brow. A hole had opened in the entrance of the factory, which had been nailed shut with boards and completely sealed off before.

The hole was unnatural. It didn't look as if it had been broken open by punches or kicks, nor did any heavy machinery or chain saws appear to be involved. And if Grace had used her blade to cut a hole, it would have been shaped differently. The hole was a good size larger than a human, and the edges were flaking and crumbling away like charcoal. It was something like rust or rot.

The other side of the hole was dark. Something was wriggling. Weddin couldn't see through it, even with the keen eyesight of a magical girl. A hand came through from the other side of the hole

to grab the edge. The black charcoal sprinkled to the ground and disappeared. Slowly, a human figure emerged from inside the factory. Weddin's expression softened slightly.

It was a swordswoman. Her eccentric clothing and beautiful face made it clear she was a magical girl. Unsure what was happening, Weddin fixed her eyes on the girl's face.

The girl smiled, showing off her beautifully straight teeth, and unsheathed the sword at her waist. If a wild beast were to smile, it would surely look just like that.

Weddin smothered a scream.

The swordswoman who emerged first spoke in a foreign language, and a magical girl carrying a crystal ball followed her.

"It seems you're enjoying your game of tag. We will be taking this opportunity to join in, as latecomers. Why don't we take on the role of 'it'? We will pursue you, so you all should run as well as you can…says General Pukin. And so, since we'll be showing no mercy to those who oppose us, I recommend doing your utmost to avoid resisting. You don't want to get hurt, do you?"

Afterword

Long time no see—or nice to meet you. I'm Asari Endou. I love magical girls. I was told to write this within thirty minutes. This is becoming a trope with my afterwords.

The thing that always happened in previous volumes hasn't happened in this one. It's unusual. In part two… Well, I should probably talk about part two when it comes out, shouldn't I?

So then what should I talk about? My love of magical girls? Like, "so-and-so is my *waifu*" or something? Such declarations are liable to make me enemies but not necessarily any friends. I'll abstain.

Should I talk about story elements I wasn't able to fit into the book? So, something like, "among all the magical girls who have appeared thus far, the tenth strongest in pure physical strength is Sister Nana," would be good, right? How about mentioning magical girls who did not appear in this volume?

Oh, I know. I'll talk about the magical girls who did appear in this volume. Pythie Frederica, whose name is mentioned in *Restart II*, appears in the online short story set before the events in this book. Those who have not yet read it, please, please take a look. You can go read it on KonoRano Publishing's official site.

Okay, now that I've included some advertising, I'm allowed to be a bit silly.

I'm not? Oh, is that right? Yes, of course. That makes sense.

So let's be serious. This volume is called "Limited," which means the setting involves limited time and space. There are sixteen people in there, so it's jam-packed. Cramped. Very harsh. And here unfolds the youthful drama of these girls locked together in combat. It's so nice. I'm jealous of the locking together part, but it's fundamentally painful stuff, so I think I'll stick to being in the audience. And so, please bear with me.

To S-mura-san and everyone in the editorial department: Thank you very much for your guidance. Serious props to S-mura-senpai for plugging along at work as I indulge in laziness. You're awesome.

Marui-no-sensei, thank you for your work in this book, as always. Those worries about whether Pukin's design should be plan A or plan B are now pleasant memories. I will love the design we couldn't use in secret.

And to all my readers: Thank you very much for buying this book. Until we meet again in one month.

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